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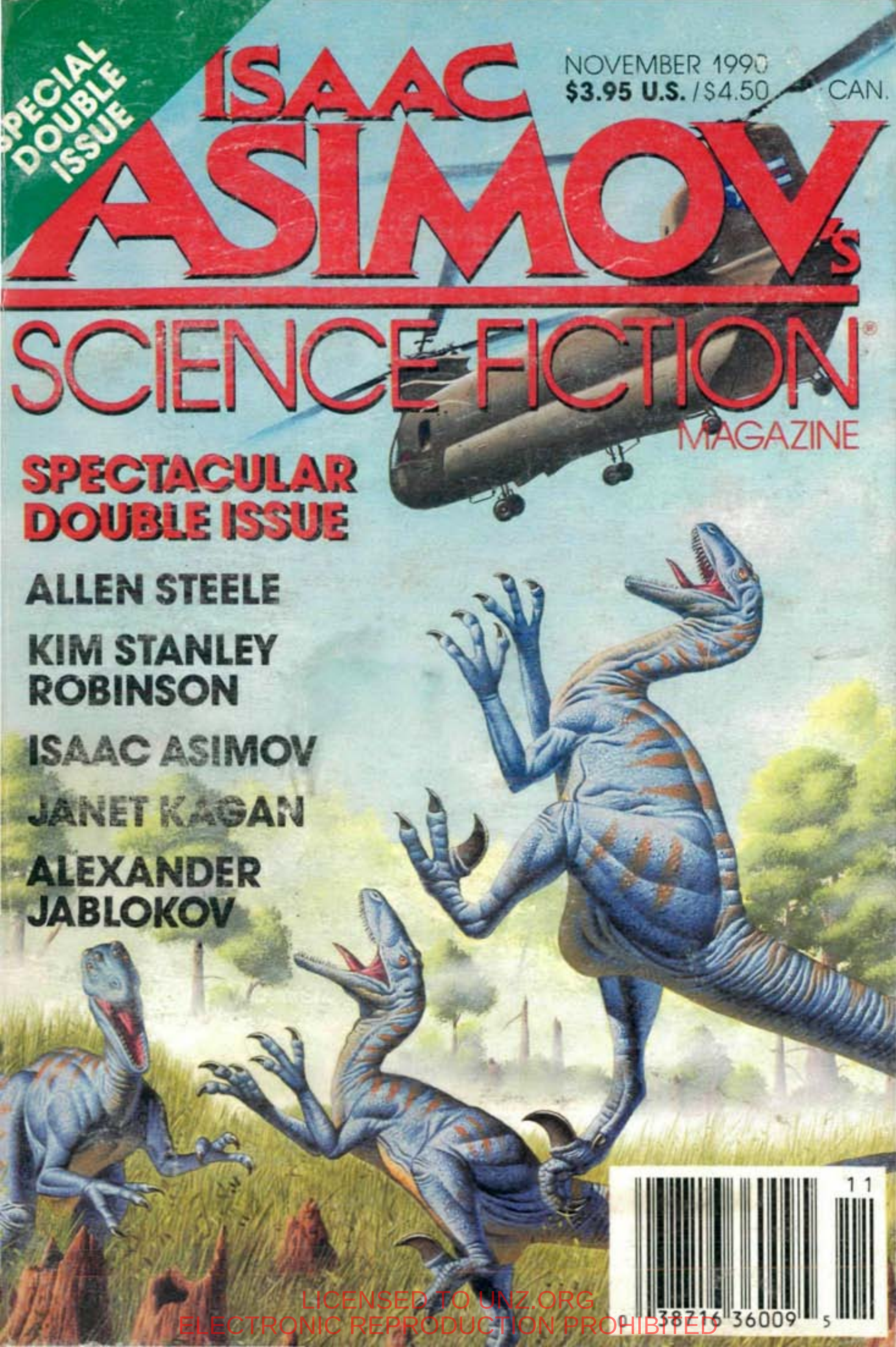

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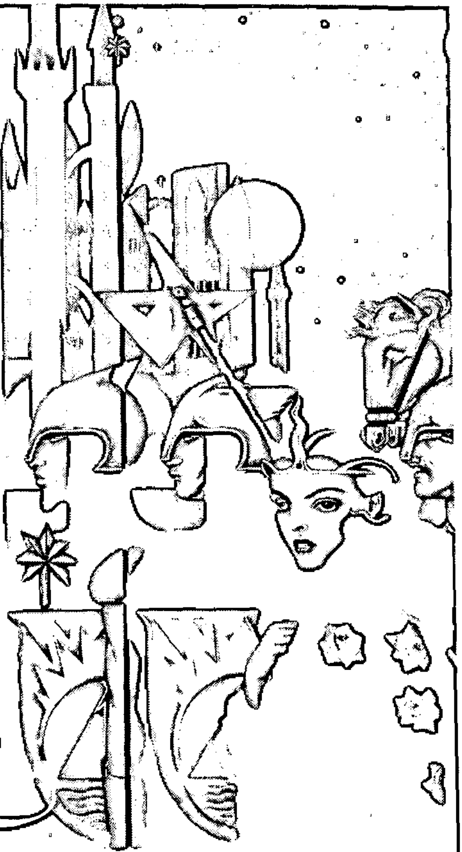

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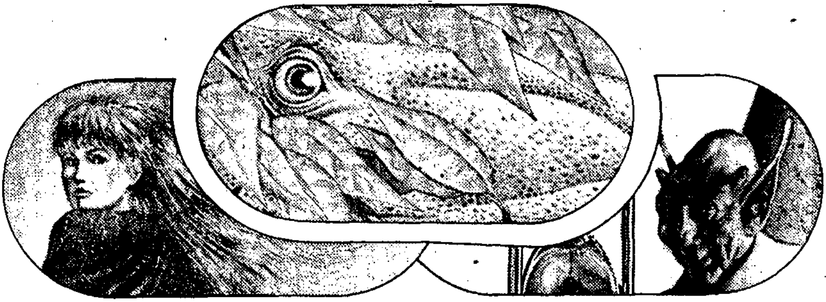

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

ANNIVERSARY

On January 2, 1990, I celebrated my seventieth birthday. I can't honestly say that this is much of a credit to me, for anyone can do the same provided they live for seventy years. Nor is it my favorite birthday. I think I would prefer thirty-five, or even twenty-five.

However, it is better to reach seventy than not to reach seventy, as I think you will all agree.

Unfortunately, I did not enjoy my new patriarchal estate. On December 6, 1989, I fell sick, after having been off my feed for quite a while. The general opinion was that I had the flu and that made me very indignant, for I hadn't had the flu in fifty-two years and I liked to believe I was above such petty weaknesses.

When I failed to get better, but instead got worse until I was in a condition that the doctors called "moribund," I was dragged off to the hospital where I spent a total of a month and a half or so with what was now diagnosed as congestive heart failure.

I was treated, responded well, made a rapid recovery and today I was liberated on my own recognizance and, provided I live under a regimen that will remove every joy of life, I should last my normal life span.

You can see, then, that when my birthday came around there was little cheering from me. In fact, for a time in December, I was seriously concerned that I wouldn't make the Biblical guarantee of three score years and ten.

It was even worse than that, for a second anniversary loomed. January 19, 1990 was the fortieth anniversary of the publication of my first novel, *Pebble in the Sky,* and Doubleday, which had published it, wished to put out a special anniversary edition, and to celebrate with a huge party. After all, they have since then published 110 more of my books (nearly three a year), which is a record for Doubleday, I believe, and so they felt something ought to be done.

I'm not much of a party man myself and I displayed a kind of reserved attitude, but they told me they would hold it at the Tavern on the Green, which is just across from my apartment, so that I could just walk over. What they did *not* tell me was that it was going to be formal.

The party was set for January 17, and everyone in the world was invited, which put me in a quandary. On the one hand, I couldn't chicken out and leave Doubleday and all the guests in the lurch. On the other hand, I was in the hospital.

There was only one thing to do. I went AWOL. I sneaked out of the hospital with my beloved internist, Dr. Paul R. Esserman. Doubleday sent a limousine which took me home where I struggled into my tuxedo and then was driven across the street to the restaurant. I made my entrance, humiliatingly enough, in a wheelchair pushed by my dear and loyal wife, Janet.

The party was a huge success and I insisted on making a speech in which I told funny stories about my earlier brush with death when I had to have a quick triple bypass. Everyone laughed except my beautiful daughter, Robyn, who wept because it upset her to have me talk about death. "But it was *funny*, Robyn," I said. "Everyone laughed." "Not I," she said. (The trouble is that she's very fond of me and I now realize I ought to have been a cruel father, and starved and beaten her so that she wouldn't mind so much if anything happened to me. Instead, I labored successfully to be a good Daddy. I have so little forethought.)

I then sneaked back to the hospital, got back into my room and pretended I had never left. Fat chance. The next day, the whole story was in the *New York Times*.

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I decided gloomily that I was a celebrity. For decades I have been calling myself a "so-called celebrity," a "pseudo-celebrity," and a "quasi-celebrity," but I must face up to it. I'm the real thing. This is not to say that I am well-known in the sense that a popular actor, or rock singer, or basketball player is well-known. My celebrity is a sharply limited one.

It seems to me that at most there are perhaps four million people in the United States who have read one or more of my books or shorter pieces and who might recognize my name. That means that something like fifty-nine out of every sixty Americans have never heard of me.

That's not surprising. I strongly suspect that fifty-nine out of sixty Americans couldn't identify Gorbachev, and couldn't name a single American senator. For that matter, I doubt if they could name the little boy who is now Vice-President of the United States. (I don't remember his name myself. Bush hides him well.)

Yet those who *do* know me include some that are surprisingly enthusiastic, even to the point where I strongly suspect lunacy.

Thus, during my stay at the hospital, the nurse came in one morning and said, "Do you know what happened last night?"

"No," I said, "What happened last night?"

She said, "A doctor was at my station and he happened to look at the list of patients, and he got all excited and said, 'Do you have Isaac Asimov here?'

" 'Yes,' I said. 'Why?'

" 'Because he's a great writer and I read all his books. Wake him up so that I can talk to him.'

"I said, 'I can't wake him up. It's 2:30 in the morning. Besides his wife is with him, and if we wake him up, she'll kill us. She guards him like a lioness.'

"So he said, 'Then let me sneak in just for a moment and *look* at him.' "

They did that, and I suppose the doctor is dizzy with triumph at having been able to look at me when I was sleeping. Considering that I am not exactly one of your notable sights even when I am in good health and brushed and scrubbed down and reasonably dressed, the sight of me, sick and burdened with old age, can't possibly have done him any good, but there you are.

Then there is the young man who has been busily engaged for years in collecting all my books without exception, including the anthologies I edit and the various unusual bits of things I do. What's more, he insists on first editions. We are often in correspondence over what I have published and what is slated for publication.

Then my conscience began to trouble me over how much he must spend for all these items and how much room he must be taking up with it at home, so I wrote to his mother and urged that she encourage him to take up another hobby.

No chance. His mother has be-

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come interested too, and was aiding and abetting him with all her might.

To some extent, I value my privacy. I am not one of your snappy dressers and when I walk about the neighborhood, I like to wear old shirts and trousers that fit all the bumps in my body, and rundown shoes, and crummy stuff like that.

Naturally, I would prefer to be ignored, and it is rather disturbing that strangers who pass by have no trouble recognizing Isaac Asimov as the clearly homeless bum who has just passed them. Taxi drivers and truck drivers recognize me. Once, even a construction worker shouted, "Hi, Isaac" as I passed.

I suppose that partly it's because I have been on television often and that my picture appears here and there, and partly it's because of my luxuriant white sideburns of a type so very few people would be seen dead with.

Of course, I might escape some of this if I were to shave off my sideburns, but no, thank you, I happen to like and value them and they are not to be touched.

Besides all the people who recognize me are not really very great in number. I am not besieged by them as I would be if I were, let us say, the late great Cary Grant. I don't really feel the necessity of wearing dark glasses and hiding behind a bodyguard.

And those who do recognize me, and sometimes even stop me and want to shake hands with me, are never obtrusive. They tend to be kind and flattering and deferential and I don't mind them at all. It is my definite opinion that although my fans are relatively few in number, they form an elite, and the sterling quality they display far outweighs their lack of numbers.

But I digress— Back to the incident of my being AWOL from the hospital.

The next day, the head nurse said to me severely, "And where were you last night?"

"Nowhere," I said innocently.

"I know all about it," she said. "Shame on you."

But my heart really broke when I called California that day to read to them my latest syndicated article for the Los Angeles *Times*. The young lady who answered said to me, "Oh, you bad boy—running out of the hospital like that."

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have been fortunate enough to meet you on several occasions and know that you have no qualms about people disputing statements which you have made!

I am unable to find the exact quote, but I believe you have stated that you pioneered the idea of robots as servants of mankind rather than creatures that (who?) have malevolently (or innocently) turned on their creators and destroyed them. I would like to refer you to a book by L. Frank Baum, *Ozma of Oz,* which was published in 1907, which was mumble years mumble you were born.

This is the third book of the wonderful series that began with *The Wizard of Oz* and resulted in a total of forty books by a number of authors. It is probably the longest series of books relating to a consistent fairy land and its surrounds with a consistent "history" of its own.

In *Ozma of Oz* a character named Tik Tok is introduced and he becomes an important resident of Oz. Since he is a mechanical man who is the "slave" of his human (Dorothy) and is completely admirable in every way, I claim that he is a benign "Asimovian" robot!

Incidentally, in addition to being possibly the longest consistent history of a fairy land, the Oz series must be the first which perpetrates puns as incorrigibly as it does!

Yours truly,

W. Richard G. Duane, Jr.
390 Naughright Rd.
Long Valley, NJ 07853

Quite right about Tik-Tok but keep this in mind. 1) At the time I invented my positronic robots in 1939, I had never read any of the Oz books. 2) Tik-Tok, as far as I know, had no discernible influence on science fiction.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Asimov and Staff,

I've just read your reply to Lon J. Rombough (Mid-Dec. 1989) in the letters section and found myself very surprised even though I know that an editor cannot spend his/her time teaching unpublished writers how to write. Considering the amount of unsolicited manuscripts received, doing so would take every spare minute from dawn to midnight seven days a week. But as an admirer and reveler in your skills and productivity, I did find your answer a little bit cold. I don't know about other writers and unpublished writers, but I write for the pure pleasure of turning a blank sheet of paper into something that can be enjoyed. Even if

I am the only one that can enjoy it. If every publisher told me that they would never print a single word of what I wrote, I would still wear out a ribbon a month just to satisfy my own need to see what I can create. But to be able to be published would fill me with more excitement and self satisfaction then "all great Neptune's ocean wash" could cleanse (to borrow from your editorial and Macbeth).

I do find the science fiction world a little cold. I wouldn't want someone, even as talented as yourself, to try to teach me how to write. If I did accept help in any department of this endeavor I would fear that my work would take on some of the teacher's way of doing her/his thing. Although someday, I wouldn't mind being compared to another writer, I want my words and ideas to be mine.

But (there's always a *but* isn't there) I would like to know if I'm getting somewhere or just wasting postage. I don't need a letter ten pages long pointing out each passage, phrase, or idea that needs this or that. Just one line saying either rejected, try again or rejected, don't send any more material. Just that would tell me all I need to know. Obviously a check would be even better.

I must say that I have never sent any stories to *IAsfm* and cannot comment on the letters that *IAsfm* uses for rejection, but I don't think that a man that cut his mind's baby teeth on an encyclopedia at an early age would find it too hard to ask the staff of his magazine to put two forms of rejection letters in the word processor to be used. Who knows, maybe it would cut down on some of the work needed to be done to produce *IAsfm* each month. And I don't know anyone that doesn't want to cut down on his/her own work.

Still a Fan,

Charles T. Waggoner, I
Dover, DE

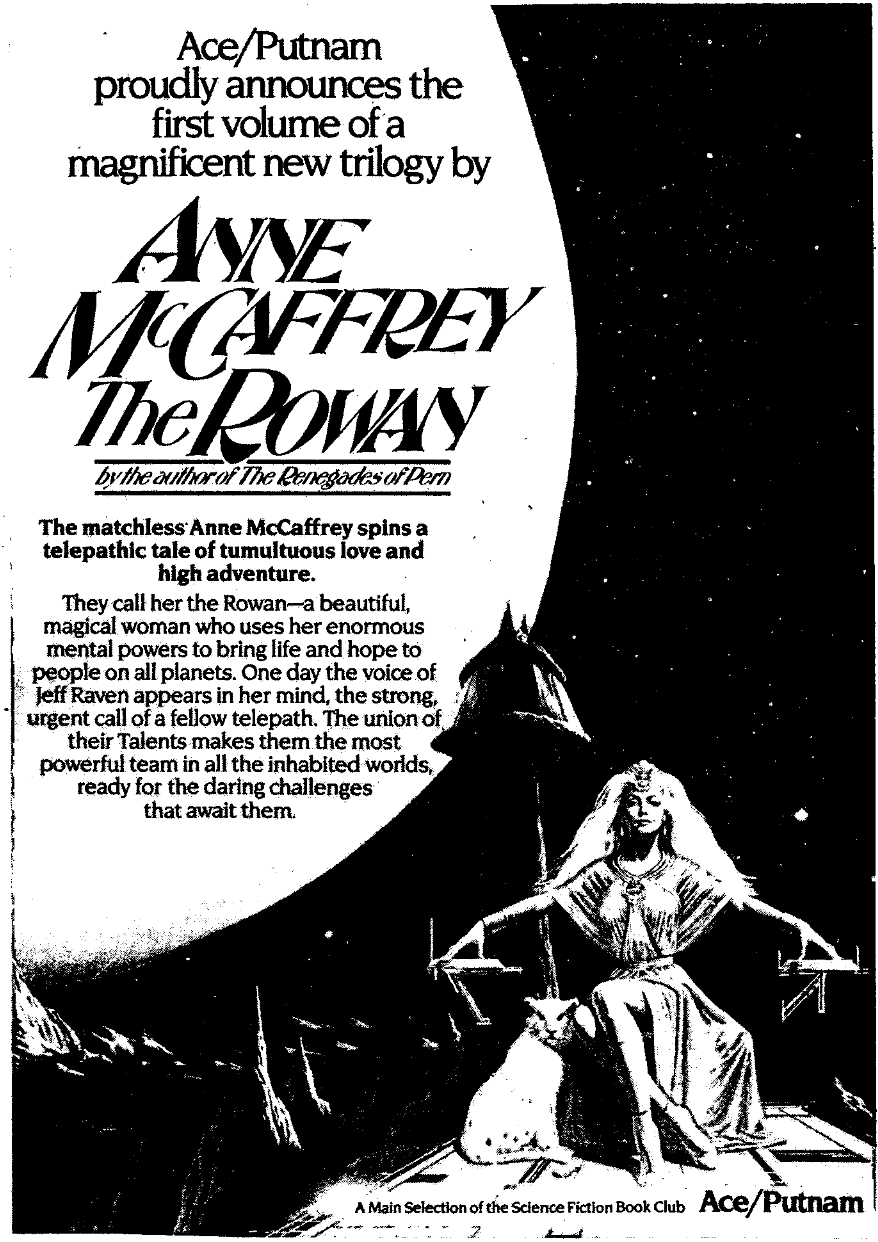
Since you don't submit anything and haven't received our rejection letters, as you admit, for all you know, we are very helpful. I doubt, though, that any editor would say "don't send any more material." Good stuff may come unexpectedly from the most unlikely sources.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Some time ago I wrote you a grumbling letter concerning the attachment of your name to the movie *Nightfall*. You responded, berating me for berating you, when the problem was with your publishers and the movie makers, and out of your control. I had intended to write again to clarify my point (evidently not well expressed in my original letter) which was that a system that permits the appropriation and misuse of an eminent individual's good name without his consent needs revising. Time passed, and I procrastinated. The second letter was never written.

Now, in the current *Analog*, your *Nightfall* story is reprinted. I had read the story so long ago that I had forgotten how good it is. Let me repeat once more that the movie completely failed to do justice to your work. And apologize for my earlier letter, which, ill-phrased as it was, was intended, not to berate



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you, but to berate the system which allows your name to be misused.
Sincerely,

Brian C. Coad
San Francisco, CA

Well, my friend, you now can understand why in my decades of writing, I have never pushed to have anything of mine done in the movies. Hollywood might make me a lot of money (I doubt it) but I can really get along on the modest sums I manage to make without it. On the other hand, Hollywood can destroy my stories, too, and who needs that.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

This is my first letter to you and I would like to congratulate you and your editorial staff on producing an excellent magazine. Ever since buying your magazine at the beginning of this year, I have been stunned by the variety of stories *IAsfm* has printed.

I would also like to thank you, personally, for enlightening and entertaining me during my early years with your marvelous books and stories. I've read virtually all of your SF stories and quite a number of your non-fiction works. In fact, I've reached the point, probably reached by a lot of your readers, where just seeing your *name* on the cover of a book makes me want to buy it! You are one of my two most favorite authors. The other, unfortunately (from your point of view), is Arthur C. Clarke.

Although none of your issues are (as yet) my personal favorite, each issue contains a gem of a story such as: Harlan Ellison's "The Few, the Proud," Robert Silverberg's "Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another," Judith Moffett's "Tiny Tango" (simply superb! I plan to get *Penterra* when the paperback edition is released here in Singapore), Janet Kagan's "The Loch Moose Monster," Alexander Jablokov's "A Deeper Sea" (It's interesting to compare the dolphins featured in his story with those in David Brin's *Startide Rising*. The differences and similarities are remarkable.), and others. Each story has amazed me.

Ditto for your editorials. In fact, they're the first thing I read (who wouldn't. After "surviving" *Opus: The Best of Isaac Asimov,* anything you write would be a delight to me). They're fascinating and I've yet to read an editorial I disagree with.

I would like to end this letter by pointing out a minor error I found in your book, *Prelude to Foundation* (am I, and the rest of your fans, asking too much by requesting you to continue the series?). In your note at the beginning, you gave a chronological list of books that form the Foundation Universe, from *The Complete Robot* to *Foundation and Earth*. But I feel you've left out one important book: *The End of Eternity*. If we accept the storyline in that book as being correct, it should be the logical beginning for the entire series.
Yours sincerely,

Soh Kam Yung
Singapore

Thank you for all your kind words, but it is not unfortunate that you also like Arthur C. Clarke (I think I've heard his name someplace). We *are usually coupled so that people who like one, like the other.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

In response to a letter in your magazine's January issue, you posed the question, "Why are there five billion of us now?" and immediately answered it with "Well, put it up to those who think contraception is a sin." Shame upon thee, Dr. A. That's only half the answer, as a moment's reflection would certainly have reminded you.

Population grows when the birth rate exceeds the death rate. The same medical technology which developed reliable and readily available contraceptives has also developed a multitude of techniques to save and extend lives—in fact, in that same issue, you mentioned having had bypass surgery. Modern methods of agriculture, along with improved food preservation and delivery systems, have largely eliminated famine (except when it's politically expedient, of course). Genocidal warfare, while well within our reach, is currently frowned upon.

No wonder we're at five billion and counting! We've locked the gates against all Four Horsemen, and we're up to our chins in one another's garbage as a result. It's short-sighted and facetious to think we can solve the problem by shooting down the Stork, as well.

Sincerely,

Lynda Carraher
Umatilla, OR

You're right, but the society that accepted all the techniques for low-

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ering the death rate has largely refused to accept the techniques for lowering the birth rate. In order to stop the population explosion, one must either raise the death rate or lower the birth rate. I prefer to lower the birth rate. And you?

—Isaac Asimov

Gentles:

For nearly fifty years I have been consumed by this eclectic genre (mostly pulps). Size and lurid covers, notwithstanding, the mags have followed me everywhere: my attics have been filled; my cellars runneth over. My taste in reading literature is most likely responsible for the breadth of my vocabulary and style of expression. My only regret is that I have not also possessed/developed the skill and type of imagination that would have allowed me to be a contributor rather than just a consumer.

In correspondence, closings have always been my bête noire. I've never been comfortable with them. There is always the awkward feeling that the ends of letters (etc.) lack pizazz. Perhaps it is because I've been spoiled by generations of facile SF writers who have mostly ended their pieces with an interesting "hook" à la O. Henry.

Lately, however, I've been disappointed to note an erosion in the current crop's termination ability. Their endings leave me unsatisfied. All of this is by way of applauding Gregory Benford ("Warstory," Jan. 1990): the "hook," "twist," "surprise ending," call it what you will, is not dead; it's alive and well and living in *IAsfm!*

With great relief,

Hank Dutton
Sherman, CT

You have to allow for fads and fashions. To many writers, the surprise ending seems corny (not to me, though).

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner (and Dr. Asimov)

I've been a subscriber since day one and while I've enjoyed the magazine immensely, I've never written. I've always felt that a renewed subscription was the proper way to show appreciation—until now, that is.

I just finished John M. Ford's piece in the January issue— "Cosmology: A User's Manual."

It's just absolutely GREAT!

John Robino
Sacramento CA

By the way, I'd renew now but my subscription goes through the end of 1994.

A loyal subscriber is the noblest work of God.

—Isaac Asimov

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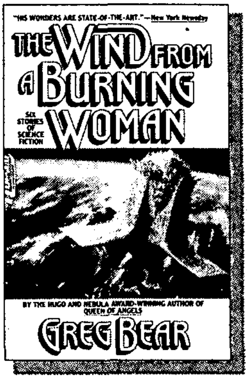
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(When you see me around, ask me who could be the new Piers Anthony…I have a good suggestion.)

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LUNA
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VIEWPOINT

Avram Davidson's series of "Adventures in Unhistory" have been published in both *Amazing* and *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, and in two anthologies: *Unicorns!* and *Mermaids!* Mr. Davidson is also a recipient of the World Fantasy Award for lifetime achievement and the author of twenty-two books. His short fiction has recently appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Night Cry, Heroic Visions II,* and *IAsfm.*

ADVENTURES IN UNHISTORY: THE MOON

art: Hank Jankus

by Avram Davidson

Not long ago a scientist whose name I'll likely never be able to locate again said something which would be discouraging to me, as a science fiction writer, insofar as I am a *science* fiction writer, insofar as I pay attention to scientists. Most of us such have long depicted "aliens," as we call them in the trade: "extraterrestrials" is a long word, or, to use an even longer phrase, "the intelligent inhabitants of other planets"; we have long depicted them as, simply, humans. Of a different sort, sometimes: even in the early days Edgar Rice Burroughs's Princess of Mars was perfectly human-looking, only she was red. In color, not politics. This did not prevent John Carter from marrying her. Of course, there was this one slight difference in breeding habits: the female red Martians—and, after all, red seems to be an appropriate color for inhabitants of the red planet—the female red Martians were oviparous. Or, as explained in the mildly bawdy ballad which some science fiction fan wrote on the subject, "John Carter laid the princess, / and the princess laid an egg."*

Evidently some faint concern did bother Burroughs: might it not be just a bit *dif*ficult to lay a baby-sized egg? He settled the matter, anyway to his own satisfaction and those of the readers, by having her lay a rather small egg, I forget just how small, and the egg, during the period equivalent to gestation, grew larger. Until it was baby-sized. And then the little offspring of this interplanetary love affair *hatched*. Well, so much for Burroughs; he made millions, and who am I to complain? Nowadays the purveyors of science fiction for the masses don't usually go that far. Oh, sometimes an extraterrestrial is shown to be such by reason of his having pointed ears. As in *Star Trek*. And in *Star Wars* there was the scene in the bar where such a creature had green skin, a long snout, and spoke like the burbling of someone speaking through a bowl of hot jello. And there were of course the funny, fuzzy Wookiees. But all in all the tendency has been to assume that the other planets are inhabited by people. Bipeds. However funny-looking. And then along came this scientist's statement that it not only ain't necessarily so, it necessarily *ain't* so. Life as we know it, he said, came about on earth because on earth we've got tides. At least some forms of early life had to adjust to the now-you're-wet and now-you-aren't syndrome. Which gave rise, after fishes, to amphibians, then reptiles, then mammals, then man. Bipeds and all. And, he went on to say, unless those other planets which lie out there have also got moons the same size as ours in comparison to their own planets: no tides. And no human or even humanoid life. As we know it or not.*

---

*AMRA, Vol. , No.

Which means that if Alpha Centauri has inhabited planets but no moon-like-ours, their inhabitants will not resemble bipeds of northern European stock in slick space-suits at all. Instead (and here I am making this up) they may be five feet square and one inch thick, and *ripple*. Maybe smell real bad. Not much chance for romance *there*. Not without tidal pools. Ah well, planets like unto earth will surely have moons like unto earth's moon, you say. You don't? Well, you may be right. Of course we cannot *know*. Not yet. And don't hold your breath until we do. For it seems that moons such as ours are fairly rare, as moons go. Mars indeed has two, but so small are they that from the surface of our so-called sister-planet (or is that Venus?), Phobos and Deimos, the Moons of Mars, seem small as stars. Jupiter and Saturn have many moons, I once knew them all by name, one has nine I think and one has eleven [two more recently turned up; is *nothing* stable?]: but somehow—somehow they are different. And so the theory has grown that our moon is not really a satellite proper, not originally formed from the sloshy gasses and then slowly coalesced into proper satellites: no: the theory says that our moon, old Luna or Selene, was originally an original planet, formed elsewhere: where? who knows? And, moseying along slowly, saw the earth shining off in the distance, and coming closer to examine it, either before it got a good look or not, UH-oh! caught. By our very own gravitational attraction. And has been circling around us ever since. Raising tides. Lowering them. Providing poets with a rhyme for June. (How far, after all, could you get with, say, *spoon*? And don't you high-diddle-

---

*The writer Katherine McLean, discussing space travel with a friend waiting for a bus in the year 1955, was asked by a skeptical eavesdropper, "You don't really *bleeve* there are planets out there, do ya?" Miss McLean then went to live in the country. Fewer bus stops.—A.D.

diddle me, either.) Making our nights ever so much more interesting than otherwise.

And providing us with such an immense-immense body of folklore and legend as to constitute a scientific discipline all of its own. Let alone fill up enough adventures, not merely monthly, but even daily, probably, for the rest of your natural lives. And from this immensity we hope to pluck a few goodies, just a few, a very, very few. Enough to adventure with. And as to where to begin, well, the moon's disc constitutes a wonderful exemplification of Charles Fort's famous maxim that One Measures A Circle, Beginning Anywhere.

We have all laughed at the yokel who said that the moon was really more important than the sun because the sun after all shone in the daytime when it was already light, whereas the moon shone at night when it was dark. Oh, all right. Laugh some more. But in a way there is something *to* this. That is, the sun is up there when we have got other things to do, rather than look at it much, that is. Also, we can't look at it too much because it hurts our eyes to do so. And the sun rises every day, every single day, there are no exceptions in human history known to us. Whereas the moon, ah, the moon. Th' inconstant moon, Juliet called it. With the moon it's a case of now you see it / now you don't. The sun is the same shape all the time. The moon differs. It grows and declines, or anyway it seems to. Actually of course, no. It doesn't. For that matter, the one great denial to the one great rule of Believe Only the Evidence of Your Senses is that our senses tell us plainly that the sun rises and the sun sets. Whereas we know—we *now* know—that the sun does neither. It is, and in violation of what our eyes clearly tell us, the earth which so to speak rises and sets. —Other than that, Signor Galileo, how did you enjoy the trial?

But to get back to the moon, the moon! Ah the moon! Farmers plant by it, fishermen fish by it, werewolves were by it, bartenders and orderlies in bughouses sigh and shiver at the thoughts of it . . . where were we? What is our own earliest memory of being taught anything at all about it? I cannot say if I can clearly recall

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VIEWPOINT

the first time I was pointed out the Man in the Moon, but I can recall having it pointed out to me when I was young indeed and it really did not come as such a shock when some skeptic of say six or seven said that the Man in the Moon was really only just make-believe, because, to tell you the truth, I was never really satisfied with that alleged and far-off shining countenance. Perhaps it would have been better in view of the idiosyncratic obliquity of my vision if I had been raised in another culture. The one where there is a Woman in the Moon? Or a rabbit? Or a toad? Or a huge piece of halvah, maybe. Really I cannot say how any of these alternatives would have suited me as a small tad. In fact as I write this now it suddenly occurs to me that the face of the moon is a sort of cosmic Rorschach Test, and that it contains to be seen what we choose to see contained in it. A whole new field opened for the speculation of mankind, mankind should have something better to speculate about; so forget it. Do you hear?

There is, to be sure, the tradition of the Umfu-Mbwuine tribe: that the moon is the child of the sun and one day the moon got sick and its skin broke out and its mother the sun warned the moon not to scratch and of course it *did* scratch, with what results we, as any fool, can plainly see. I am rather fond of this rather sensible little legend, obviously so useful in scaring small and even large children with rashes, chicken pox, acne, or whatever: the legend has in fact but one small flaw: I made it up. The real myths of mankind are always much MUCH more complicated.

And where does myth leave off, legend begin, science get a head start onto things? Hard to say. The moon figures large in astrology, and astrology is to astronomy what alchemy is to chemistry; save of course that alchemy is dead/dead/dead, whereas astrology still figures in our daily papers. Unlike astronomers, I am not in the least vexed by the persistence of astrology, in which I say simply I have no faith nor belief, but which I consider at its worst merely harmless, and at its best a rich contributor to the imagery of mankind. I did once indeed

AVRAM DAVIDSON

"... Ah the Moon! Farmers plant by it, fishermen fish by it, werewolves were by it, bartenders and orderlies in bughouses sigh and shiver at the thoughts of it ... I cannot say if I can clearly recall the first time I was pointed out the Man in the Moon, but I can clearly recall having it pointed out to me when I was young indeed ..."

supply my birthdate and time to an astrologer in Sausalito who promised—offered, rather; I had exacted no promise, I had merely bought him breakfast, the practice of astrology evidently not going too well from a merely monetary point of view that morning; and he said he would draw up my chart. He did indeed, and very colorful it was, too: only I could not understand a single sign or sigil of it. At random, then, I pointed to something lying at about twenty-five after the hour, so to speak, and asked, "What does this mean?" His answer was as prompt as it was undeniable. He said, "This is Mercury trine. It means yer good at liddychur and shit."

However. The moon. Once in another portion of my past I lay at anchor, so to speak, in the lost land of British Honduras in Central America, now called Belize, and not much the richer for it, either. The vessel required a new mast, and one was bespoken for, of Santa Maria wood: but it would take quite a while, it seemed, for this to be ready and brought down the coast to Haulover Creek, one of the two mouths of the Belize River. Our

VIEWPOINT

port captain suggested that he and his crew go out into the swampy coast and cut a temporary mast out of mangrove wood, and jury-rig it until the better one, of Santa Maria wood, would be available. I may add that a working mast of Santa Maria on another boat was pointed out to me; it was twenty years old and looked as fresh as though it were only twenty days.

I assented to the temporary mast and when several days had passed and no mangrove spar having appeared, I inquired of the port captain if they had not better get onto the job; he answered, "Well, Mr. Avram, They say it is a wrong moon . . ." And what did he mean? He meant that as the moon was waxing, was growing (as any fool could plainly see), and as the moon drew up water (as any fool could plainly see), it was considered that this was a bad, or wrong, phase of the moon to cut a mast: the moon would have drawn the water up into it and it would certainly prove soggy and soupy and soon rot.

A pretty kettle of subtropical fish. Now although I had never made a test of trees cut during the waxing of the moon and didn't even know of anyone who had, if anyone had, I therefore could not prove that he was right. I did not in fact feel certain that he was wrong. But I did feel certain that he and all the other crew felt certain about it, and so *I* felt certain that they would never work well with such a mast. And so I assented to wait. The mangrove was eventually induced to supply a straight enough spar—and you must not regard these native peoples there as being fearfully superstitious, for they informed me of another of the sayings of the They, to wit, "They say that if you cut a mangrove it weel drive you mod"—I marveled at this curious transformation of the legend of the mandrake, so far from its source, so long after one would have thought it quite dead. And so stoutly elbowed aside in his last stronghold.

But I had a vision of all this going on forever and ever; so I said, *I* said, very judiciously, "They say that rum will prevent that." Well, it was the local consensus that rum would prevent *any*thing, if you wanted anything prevented. So a

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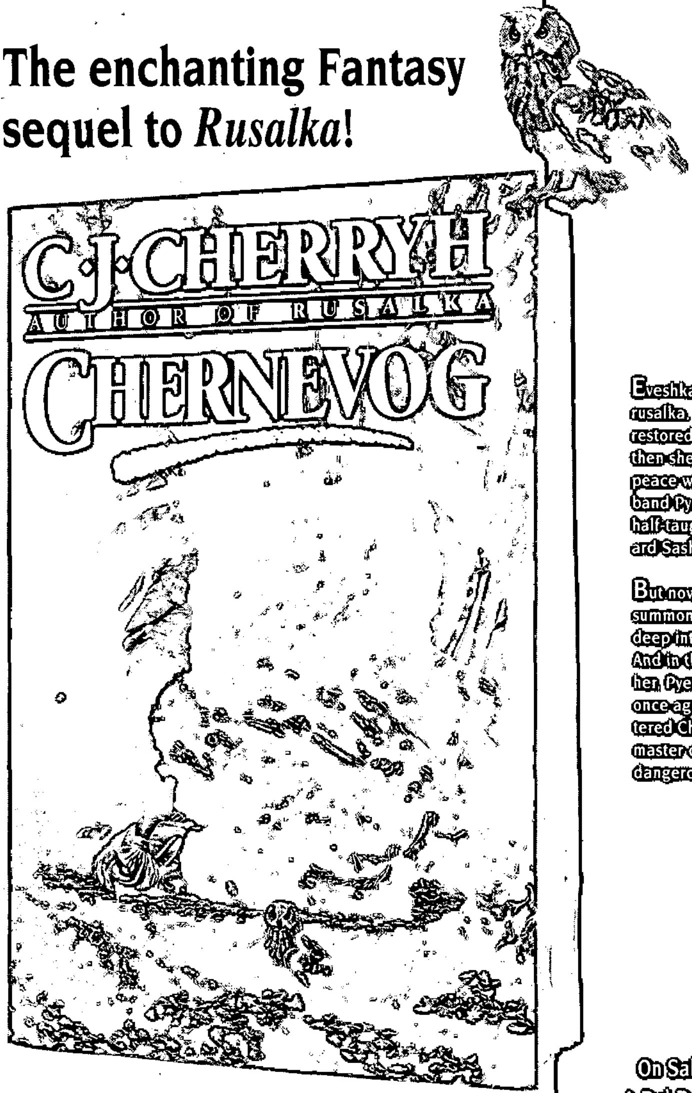

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quantity of white rum was provided and off they went into the mangrove bogs and cut a temporary mast and jury-rigged it and bent on the sail and off we went. Madness? Madness be damned; pass the rum! We went out past the islands called the Hen and Chickens, past Frenchman's Caye, past Caye Caulker, and were within sight of Ambergrise Caye when we caught a great breeze. The sails went *Smack*! And the mast went *Crack*!

We crept into port under cover of darkness sufficient to hide our shame. I had done a lot of thinking. At length I said, "Maybe it was the wrong rum."

"Oh yes, sir!" they said. "Oh yes, Mr. Avram. They say that colored rum is better than white." Were there undertones of Race in this? After all, the rum all came from the same distillery and in fact it came out white and sometimes coloring was added and sometimes it was not. With taste and scent, no argument. However. We all knew what the real trouble was. It was not the wrong rum. It was the wrong moon.

Eventually the proper mast appeared, but by the most curious coincidence, having I am sure nothing to do with the fact that Santa Maria wood had become increasingly scarce whereas local hardwood pine had remained as common, almost, as ever: the true mast proved to be pine. And not Santa Maria. We stepped it in anyway. And the boat business went to hell anyway. The sloop proved damnably crank. And one day, on the very day as it happened that the Archbishop of Canterbury arrived on a sort of megapastoral visit, I asked my boss, "What should we do with the boat?" He said, gloomily, "Lay it on the archbishop and run." So I said to the boat captain, "Take the boat down to the Foreshore as we are going to give it to the bishop." He said, "Sir, de boat seen-keeng." I said, "Take it down fast, then, and tie it up in front of the bishop's house, so he can see where it sinks."

I understand that she sank three times, and that the bishop raised her twice. My opinion, he probably acted during the wrong moon. And that, to cut it brief, was the end of the Bay of Honduras Company (Registered). Was it the end of the boat? I am sure that the bishop was not so unChristian as to sell it to another ignorant outlander. But he may have allowed someone to Take It Off His Hands, who was.

Many miles and leagues from Central America, in fact in the Holy Land of Israel, I asked of a young man from what was still the Kingdom of Yemen and is now the People's Democratic Republic of North Yemen (there is one of South Yemen, too: my advice: avoid both), why he was said to hang a blanket up over his window at certain times of the month. He said, quite simply, that if you allowed the palms of your hands to be exposed to the light of the full moon, it would raise blisters. Again, not being aware of any scientifically-controlled tests, I cannot say. What I *can* say, though, is that these legends have certainly one thing in common: a belief that the moon draws up fluid . . . liquid . . . whether in the form of swamp-water into a tree, or of sap, perhaps, or of blister-fluid into your palms. It may not be correct. But it is, so to speak, logical. There are, after all, always the tides. Those damn tides. Almost I am tempted to say "Damn those tides." But, ha ha, I don't mean that. Not really. Because if those guys who want to build colonies way off in outer space and use up the moon for materials eventually use *up* the moon then there will be no tides; so what will happen to us down here? Will our remote descendants, perhaps, be five feet square and one inch thick, and *ripple*? (Smell real bad, too?)

When I lived on one of the fast-vanishing houseboats in Sausalito the tides were of less importance to me, moored ashore as my boat was, than to those who lived in what were called, self-descriptively, anchor-outs—these people always carried with them little pamphlets with the tides listed for the given year, for, if one tarried too long, the shallows of inner Richardson's Bay became a mass of mud through which no boat could be rowed or even poled. And many a tender moment was interrupted by a cry of, "The tide! The tide!"—unless, of course, one wished to, was able to, or was permitted to remain until the incoming waters made navigation possible again. The tides varied not only by time of day, but by month as well, and in January it was not unusual for them to rise six or seven feet:

many a sloshy piece of shore or inundated bunk or galley resulted. The high tides of winter even erupted up through the many holes in Waldo Point Road, which was actually below sea-level: and during one such high water one of these sumps at Waldo Point was decorated with a home-made sign reading WALDO POND. But all this is doomed to change; the shanty-boats will be abolished, the road widened and raised and re-paved. Still, I have a feeling that these changes, curiously called Improvements and Developments, may not last. The moon is after all older than man. And the moon will yet reclaim her own. As William Blake put it, *The starry floor, the watery shore,/Is given thee till the break of day.*

Tides nowadays are, if not controllable, then anyway to an extent and for a while escapable. There are docks, there are even floating docks, which rise and fall with the ebb and flow. How different it was once upon a time may be seen from that watery old compendium with vine leaves in its hair, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. It speaks now of a certain area in northern India . . .

"The putting in and the putting out of ships are dangerous for the inexperienced. . . . When there is a pull of water at the time of flood-tide, there is no withstanding it, nor do the anchors hold against it; for which reason even big ships, caught by the force of it and turned broadside through the swiftness of the flow, run aground on the shoals and break up, while the smaller barks are even overturned. And some which have been turned on their sides in the channel through the ebb-tide, if you do not prop them up, when the flood-tide comes back suddenly, are filled with water by the first head of the flow. For so great are the forces of the onrush of the sea at the time of the new moon, especially the flood-tide at night [when, mind you, ironically, there is not enough moonlight to see by] . . . that . . . there is borne to the ears . . . a noise like the shouting of an armed camp, and after a little, the sea itself rushes over the shoals with a roar."

It must have been terrifying; and there alone is one reason why, it is easy to see, the moon was worshipped.

And here is a quotation from that mysterious old liar, Sir John

PIERS ANTHONY

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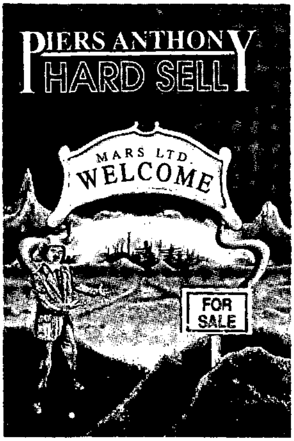

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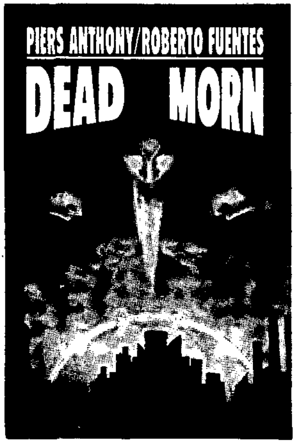

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de Mandeville, say 1200 years after the *Periplus*; to explain why so few people in those days moved from east to west—from Asia into Europe, say—whereas so many moved from west to east—say, from Europe into Asia: "For the people of Ind . . . be in the climate of Saturn; and Saturn is slow and little moving; for he tarryeth thirty years to make his turn through the twelve signs of the zodiac. . . . And in our country, all is contrary; for we be in the climate . . . of the moon. And the moon is of lightly moving, and the moon is planet of way; and for that skill it giveth us will of kind for to move lightly and for to go divers ways, and to seek strange things and other diversities of the world; for the moon environeth the earth more hastilly than any other planet." *And the moon is of lightly moving, and the moon is planet of way* . . . Beautiful, is it not? That the moon has indeed charge of travel is something which must be reckoned Not Proven; but that it is *of lightly moving* cannot be denied. The moon is the minute hand of the heavens. Perhaps we little realize how changeable the moon is; do we all clearly recognize that full moon does not merely occur on a certain night but at a certain *time* of that certain night, plenilune it is called; this may be clearly seen if the night is clear. And your eyes, too.

Old Sir John, perhaps moved by his own eloquence about the moon, now takes time to tell us about the rhinoceros; that there are rhino of one horn and rhino of two, we all know; Sir John saw fit to combine them: "It hath three long horns trenchant in the front, sharp as a sword, and it is a full felonious beast, and he chaseth and slayeth the elephant." When the dragons aren't doing it, one supposes. As a matter of fact, although there is no evidence of a rhinoceros killing an elephant, there is evidence that one will sometimes, supposedly a cow rhino with calf, chase one elephant and, no, not gore it: *bite* it. Hm, and what has this to do with the moon? Hastily I report that because of the rhino's horns it was in past times sometimes associated with the horns of the moon. So there.

And Sir John babbles on about the once-famous Trees of the Sun and the Moon, evidently at least two different trees but growing close together, "that spake to

King Alexander and warned him of his death." I have tried to trace this further, and in fact further references have I found: but information no more than this. Fascinating. Irritating.

Long later than Sir John, whoever Sir John really was, there was, in the eighteenth century, in England, the distinguished association named The Lunar Society, whose meetings were held "nearest to the time of the full moon, to enable its more distant visitors to travel home in greater safety by its light." If this was so important a mere two hundred-odd years ago, conceive what it must have been two thousand and more.

Seneca, the Roman philosopher and moralist, asks a question of the sort which we, in our presumably advanced state of both, consider to be typically rather naïve: "What were nature's purposes in providing material capable of receiving and reflecting images?" His answer is, that among other purposes was that of astronomical investigation. There were no telescopes, recollect, in those days—unless there really was a sort of one atop the Pharos, the great lighthouse in Alexandria—and so Seneca recommends that we "examine the sun and the moon," during eclipses, "in basins on the ground." This is sound, if simple enough, and had Seneca confined himself to such-like comments, all might have gone well with him; but no, those philosophers are never satisfied to let well enough alone; and Seneca recommended that monarchs behave with justice. This insolence did not pass unnoticed by the monarch of the time, one Nero, who, out of respect to Seneca, his old tutor, allowed him to commit suicide instead of being dipped in tar and used as an illumination in the amphitheater. . . . Or so it is said. Nero himself does not say so. It might be a base canard spread by his political enemies after he himself, moaning, "What an artist dies in me!" committed suicide in a barn where he was hiding. Who knows? Once you're down, everybody kicks you. Onward.

When we consider that in some systems of folklore—an absolute contradiction in terms, folklore being by its very basis unsystematic—nevertheless—we have a man in the moon and in others we have a *woman* in the moon, are we to suspect sexism? We often find whatever evidence we look for, is it not so? The world is after all abundant. Of course, what is evident to one is not always evident to another. A man in the state of Virginia complained to me once, in absolute seriousness, of what he called "antiChristian elements in the arithmetic books" used in local schools. When I asked what these were, he cited me the following problem, "If there are three goblins and two goblins, how many goblins are there?" I told him that I saw what he meant. The word *moon* must imply many things to all and each of us, but, basically, it is, is it not? the name, merely, of a big ball of slag which revolves around the earth and reflects the light of the sun? We say *moon* as we say *chair* or *river* or *star* or *kitchen sink*. Basically, these words have no connotation of sex to us. One reason is of course that we speak English and think English and the English language is one of many of the world's languages which has no gender. And gender is that which determines sex. But many languages do have gender, and in some of them everything is either masculine, feminine, or neuter; and in some of them there is no neuter and hence everything, but everything, every single noun and adjective or adverb, is either masculine or feminine.

There is throughout the world no consistency in the matter of what sex the moon is. In some languages the moon is feminine, in others masculine. Volumes might be written to justify the choice in any case. But when the cases are compared, the theories break down. Some languages do not even display consistency in the matter. For example, in Hebrew, a word for the sun is *chammah*. Which means, *heat*. It is feminine. And a Hebrew word for the moon is *levana*. Which means *white*. It is also feminine. On the other hand, Hebrew has another word for sun, *shemesh, preparer*: which is masculine. And it has another word for moon, *yoréach, month-maker*: which is masculine. In some other languages, too numerous to consider, there is absolutely no ambiguity: the moon is always either masculine or feminine, the sun is always either feminine or masculine. What happens when languages and/or language-

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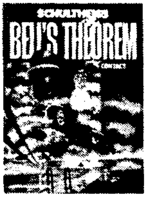
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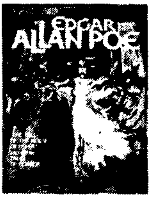
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VIEWPOINT

"... As a matter of fact, although there is no evidence of a rhinoceros killing an elephant, there is evidence that one will sometimes, supposedly a cow rhino with calf, chase one elephant and, no, not gore it: bite it. Hm, and what has this to do with the moon? Hastily I report that because of the rhino's horns it was in past times sometimes associated with the horns of the moon. So there."

involved cultures influence one another? Sometimes a real confusion results. And the attempts to resolve this confusion are in themselves sometimes confusing but are also, certainly, interesting.

So let me cite again a citation which I've cited in connection with the mermaid legend. The Rev. Mr. S. Baring-Gould is the source. "As On, the sun-god rising and setting in the sea, was supplied with a corresponding moon-goddess, Atergatis, and Bel or Baal, also a solar deity, had his lunar Baalti, so the fiery Moloch, 'the great lord,' was supplied with his Mylitta, 'the birth-producer.' Moloch was the fierce flame-god, and Mylitta the goddess of moisture. Their worship was closely united.

"The priests of Moloch wore female attire, the priestesses of Mylitta were dressed as men."

This approaches, anyway at a tangent, the complex question of transvestism, into which I do not propose to enter, except to observe that year by year I observe more and more women wearing trousers, but I observe no men at all wearing skirts. This may be of course merely because I do not frequent the

AVRAM DAVIDSON

right night-clubs, but let that be. In regard to this ancient religious masquerade we see, I think, an attempt to solve a confusion about the sex of the sun and the sex of the moon. Which one should be served by priests, that is, men; and which by priestesses, that is, women? The Phoenicians, to whom these statements refer, were not a people known for very deep religious mysticism or speculation; they were primarily craftsmen and tradesmen. They felt that business was business and that one should get on with things. They therefore decided that the sun was male and should be served by males and that the moon was female and should be served by females. However. Just in case. Maybe after all the sun was *female*? Might she, or he, as the case might be, be annoyed? And although the moon was or had been declared officially female, well, just suppose the moon *was*n't female? It was a vexing and a perplexing problem, and I think we ought to give them E for Effort in their attempts to solve it: in performing religious functions in the temples, let each sex wear the clothes of the other sex.

Our old friend Monsieur Bessy, author of *A Pictorial History of Magic and the Supernatural*, and to whom I often give a hard time although he does try hard, says this: Mars was linked "with brute force, aggressive and sadistic impulses, the desire for conquest and passion." Straightforward enough, what? There seems to have been little question about the sex of *Mars*. —It is at every moment essential to remember that to the ancients (as well as to some moderns, though only some) *everything* was animated, that *everything* had a spirit or a soul: the stars and the planets, the earth itself, and certainly the sun and the moon, each one was a living entity. Nothing may seem deader to us than the moon today, but to many peoples now living and to all peoples formerly alive, the moon was alive, if not always alive and well, for the monthly changes of the moon were by some associated with a sort of infirmity: Now she is entire and now she dwindles and now she vanishes and now she starts coming back again: goodness how thin she is, the poor darling . . . Oh. I said *she*. Didn't I? Well, of course, sometimes it was *he*. But the feminine seems to have been the more popular choice, and I need not labor the association of the lunar cycle, which was (and damn straight still is!) monthly, that is, to employ a Latin rather than an Anglo-Saxon form, the lunar cycle is *mensual*: and whilst all mammals ovulate, so far as I know, only humanity menstruates . . . that is, the female portion of it does. As to why this process, we are told, reflecting the tides of the sea from which our ancestors originally came, should skip the lower life-forms and pop up in mankind—it beats me. Clark Ashton Smith said, in one of his poems, *Our blood is swayed by sunken moons* . . . but there may certainly be no connection. Then again, there may. And a lot of the ancient world took the connection for granted.

Bessy again. ". . . the sun was always associated with life, warmth, etc., whilst the moon was linked with material things, fecundity, imagination, the unconscious, dreams, instinct . . ." You may form your own opinions. He says, too, that in palmistry, some call it chiromancy, I believe, "The thenar prominence is assigned to Venus, the hypothenar to the moon." Perhaps someone here knows which these may be; I do not. Not yet.

The ancient Greeks believed that certain witches, particularly from the north, was it Thessaly or was it Thrace, had the power to "haul down the moon and/or the stars." They even had a term for it, *kataspanten selene*. Could this be some extremely primitive recollection of watching the reflection of those heavenly bodies in a basin? as Seneca suggested. Ah, but you say, *ev*erybody had a basin and would have noticed such things. Ah, but you may be wrong. My mother told me that her mother told her that *her* mother, that is, my great-grandmother, said that *she* had been told that there was a time when their family (deep in Europe, in Hungary, in fact) had not even dishes to eat out of: and the food was placed from the pot into depressions hewn out of or into the thick table-tops. I do not suggest such memories going back as far as ancient times, but I suggest such poverty perhaps going back that far: in which case a basin may have been more than a luxury: it may have been an instrument of astronomy: which is to say: of magic. —An aside:

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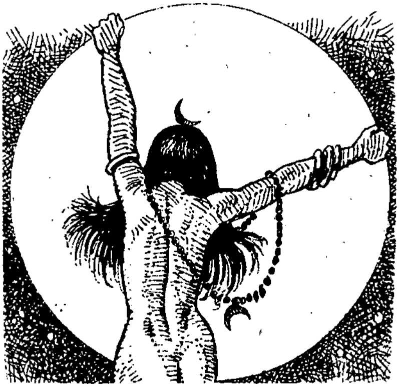
Now, just to add to the confusion, is a line from the History of the Seven Sages: "He came to a spring, from which whoever drank, if a man, turned into a woman, and if a woman, into a man." I see in this the influence, real or imagined, of the changing moon, the ruler of water. But remember all those priests and priestesses, swapping clothes like mad? and I find this, too, translated from an Anglo-Saxon Manual of Astronomy; which casts I think a lot of light, even if only a murky sort, on what I said about the Belizean Creole sailors and their views on wood and water: heave ho! "It is natural that all earthly bodies are fuller at the increasing moon than at the waning. Also the trees that are cut down at full moon are harder against worm-eating and more durable than those which are cut down at new moon. The sea and the moon agree between them, ever they are companions in increase and in waning; and as the moon daily rises four points later than he did the day before, so also the sea flows four points later."

And the same source even seems to cast a glimmer on the matter of bringing down the stars, if not, as well, the moon: thus: "It is not stars that fall [from heaven], but it is fire from the sky, which flies from the heavenly bodies as sparks do from fire." I might add that *the* most bright-and-luminous shooting star which I have ever seen fall, fell in Texas, as I watched, in El Paso. I do not know if the Asarco copper smelter had anything to do with it.

Albertus Magnus, who was one of the great medieval Aristotelians and general writers on science and philosophy, as well as being Bishop of Ratisbon (Regensburg), mentions almost in passing that "Monday hath its star under the moon," that is, is influenced especially by the moon among the heavenly bodies; and that it is a day significant for "palace, sleep, trade, and theft." I would suppose that this is subject to different interpretations. Wouldn't you?

People of former times have been criticized for paying too much attention to that view of



". . . Nothing may seem deader to us than the moon today, but to many peoples now living and to all peoples formerly alive, the moon was alive, if not always alive and well, for the monthly changes of the moon were by some associated with a sort of infirmity: Now she is entire and now she dwindles and now she vanishes and now she starts coming back again: goodness how thin she is, poor darling . . ."

cause and effect termed "after it, therefore because of it." They might equally be faulted for paying too little. When they saw and heard wild birds flying and calling overhead in the daytime, they were apt enough to say, "Ahah. Wild birds flying and calling overhead." However, did the same phenomenon occur at night, did they nod sagely and say, "Ahah. Wild birds flying and calling overhead"?—not so damned likely. They were likelier to make no connection at all, and to say, instead, "There goes one of the elder gods leading after him all the damned souls doomed for believing in him or her; put another log on the fire, check the charms to see if they're hanging by the doors and windows, and, say, if any of that holy water is left it wouldn't do no harm to sprinkle it around with a lavish hand." Which helps us to dig what old Jake Grimm says, listen: "From her attribute as huntress and moon-goddess, Diana long survived as the leader of the Wild Hunt"—i.e., that nocturnal clamor we've just spoken of; sometimes called the Gabriel Hounds and other names. "Throughout the middle ages she is connected with the streams—"

with water, right? "—and forests. She is associated with the moonlight huntress, the mid-day demon, the fates who guard a child's birth, and the sirens . . ."

Wordsworth said he'd rather *be* a pagan suckled in a creed outworn.

Well, speaking of the moon and of shooting stars, remember old Julius Solinus, called "Pliny's Ape"? Pliny said *"Write it down!"* and Solinus came sneaking up and read it over his shoulder?—so to speak. Solinus says, "The Glossopetre falleth from the sky in the wane of the Moone, lyke to a man's tongue, and it is of no small power as the Magicians affirme." I will translate *glossopetre* as glossy stone, if that's all right with y'all: and I wonder if it might be associated with the so-called tektites? These iddy-biddy pieces of black stone are indeed glossy, and it was widely-held by a small circle of astronomers that they had not merely *fallen* from the moon but had been so-to-speak *splashed* from the moon, either when something hit it when it was still hot and soft, or when something hot and soft hit *it*: nam port. I had one once. It would be remarkable indeed if the Magicians of Solinus had guessed aright on this; but, as it happens, evidently neither did those modern astronomers, for recent trips to the moon by sundry American citizens who brought back samples have led to a loss of belief in the tektite theory. So, so much for that. Another good story gone to pot. *Sigh*

—I am slightly restored by Lin Carter's phrase, speaking of "The world of Amadis of Gaul," *palaces of moon-pale marble, white as carven ice* . . . Can this be a point of connection with Albertus Magnus's horoscope of Monday, moon-day, significant for *palaces*? Who the hell knows. It's a lovely line, anyway. *Palaces of moon-pale marble, white as carven ice* . . . Ah, the moon! Ah, the moon!

Have any of you read, either as child or adult, a book by E. Nesbit, called *The Five Children and It*. . . . ? . . . in fact; I believe that there were three books; well, I read them, as both an adult and as a child, liked them tremendously. The kids had an amulet which would among other things take them back in time and away in place, and when they had a curious artifact which they'd brought back and wished

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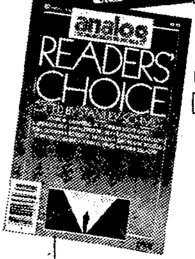
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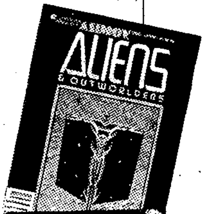
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to check out, they took it to someone referred to only as "the learned gentleman who lives upstairs." There is a widespread belief that writers never make up characters, they always pick someone they know, and "put him (or her) in a book." Well, of course this is nonsense, but in this case it is not. The learned gentleman may or may not have lived upstairs from E. Nesbit, but he was an actual person, a Dr. A. E. Wallis Budge, a curator in the British Museum, and it is to his learning that we are indebted for the knowledge that "according to the *Book of Arbatal* . . . the seventh Angel ruled over seven Provinces, and directed everything which appertained to the Moon. He could transmute anything and everything into silver—" an appropriate color for the moon "—and cure dropsy"—edemia, or excess of fluid in the tissues "—and destroy the evil spirits of the world." To which I have only one question: why didn't he? By the way, "E. Nesbit" was in private life Mrs. John Bland; and her private life contained, besides of course *Mr.* John Bland, some rather curious incidents. For one thing, although they were among the founders of the Fabians, the early British socialist group, nonetheless they had a governess to mind and teach the children, a mousy creature named Miss Muffin or something like that; fancy this! one day the governess confessed that Mr. John Bland had gotten her with child. Mrs. Bland (E. Nesbit) was forgiving. Ah the men! She adopted the child; after all, the *governess* did most of the child-raising anyway; right? And life went on, in fact it went on for *twenty-seven years!* . . . at which point Miss Muffin confessed that Mr. Bland had Done It To Her Again . . . as, evidently, he *had.* Mrs. Bland blanched at this and at this divorced him, and married a ferry-boat captain. What's the connection with the moon? Water. That's the connection.

And now, coming down the pike, is someone whom I think we perhaps haven't met before; easily remedied: Cornelius Agrippa, a sixteenth century scholar and soldier, in and out of trouble with both his creditors and the Inquisition; claimed that magic occupied a position in between science and theology: natural or good magic, that is. Listen to his advice: ". . . it is necessary to be careful, when using a magic square as an amulet, that it is drawn when the sun or moon, or the planet, is exhibiting a benevolent aspect, for otherwise the amulet will bring misfortune and calamity upon the wearer instead of prosperity and happiness." And your creditors will throw your ass into debtors' prison. To say *no*thing of the Inquisition.

Ah the moon. Eh?—According to learned Dr. Wallis Budge, in kaballistic astrology "the Moon [rules] the heel of the hand." Perhaps that's what Bessy meant by "the hypothenar prominence," in which case why the hell didn't he *say* so?—Now, a very ancient Zodiac on an Egyptian coffin shows Taurus, the Bull, carrying the moon on his back. If this doesn't remind you of the cow that jumped over the moon, then what does? and what did?

As to why the Egyptian bull had the moon (and not, say, a monkey) on his back, well, I can but guess. The Ancient Egyptians were crazy about animals. And if you had been privileged to overhear one saying, "Oh, I just worship that animal!" the chances are that very likely he or she *did*. So it should be no surprise that there was in the ancient Egyptian city of Memphis a sacred bull. And, worshipped or not worshipped, every three years this bull—his name was Apis—was taken down to the Nile, and ceremoniously drowned. After which the Egyptians found another bull, a sort of reincarnation of the first, and the whole booby business began all over again. *Water*! And the moon! (And, after all, the moon and the bull both have horns, don't they?)

If I seem just a trifle emotional about this, the fact that I am a Taurus has, I am sure, nothing whatever to do with it.

There was an old man and his name was Charles Godfrey Leland; he was one of the genuine originals, eccentrics, if you prefer; and among other things he was an artist, a master-bookbinder, and a writer of dialect poems for American newspapers, about a hundred years ago: then he went to Europe. He was one of the discoverers, perhaps the chief or first discoverer, of a most curious dialect called *Shelta*, used by, what shall we call them? hoboes seems not right, beggars is only partly right, well, well, there they were, in and around Liverpool, and speaking their own odd language: Leland spent a long time and bought a lot of drinks, and wrote down the curious idiom till his fingers ached, for there were as yet no tape recorders. Under analysis Shelta proved to be a form of Gaelic turned inside out and on its head . . . but there were the facts. So one is inclined to listen when Leland lectures. He claimed, after having moved to Italy, to have been taken into the confidence of the stregas, or witches. He says that they had a sort of ritual feast, consisting of meal, salt, honey, and water. "There was," he says, at this ceremony, "a special conjuration for Cain (who was in some way related to Diana and imprisoned in the moon) to tell the fate of the suppliant in water . . . Like the horse and dog, [the hare] was a beast closely associated with Diana . . ." Hmm. Well, Cain baffles me. The horse is easy enough to guess at, hunters sometimes hunt with horses, and often they hunt with dogs. The hare would, however, be the victim: why should the hunting-beasts and the hunted-beasts all be sacred to the same deity? Well, things are very seldom simple, and this may not be one of them. But let's not forget that besides the man in the moon and the woman in the moon there is also, in East Asian folklore, the *hare* in the moon. Perhaps the connection is this: Diana is goddess of fertility, well, especially of fecundity: and the hare is proverbially fecund. They maybe cain't add but they shore kin multiply, har har har.

But let me take you away from all this. Up, up, up and away into the realm of Dante. He has by now been guided by Vergil out of the Inferno and up into the Purgatorio, where he much prefers the scenery.

> And by night and day the flaming hosts of Heaven, which were never seen in Hell—the undimmed sun, the moon like a burnished mazer, the starry habitations of the Zodiac—wheel around the alien pole through a sky which knows no clouds.

The moon like a burnished *what*? Answer: mazer. Says my dictionary, "a large drinking-bowl, originally of wood." There's that old basin again . . . also my great-grandmother's story . . . also some echo of old Omar's:

Before the spectre of false
morning died
Methought I heard a voice

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VIEWPOINT

within the tavern cried,
"When all the temple is
prepared within,
Why waits the drowsy
worshipper outside?"

For one thing, what does Omar mean by "false morning"? Can it be what is sometimes called "the lunar Aurora, or Moon-Dawn"? If so or not so, there is anyway a legend about *this*: King Priam of Troy, the father-in-law of Helen of Troy, had a brother by the name of Tithonus. Who fell in love with Aurora, goddess of the dawn. Now, just in case you thought it was only the old Greek *gods* who used to have all those fun and games with mortal *women*, so now you see that it took two to tango, even back Then: Well, by and by Aurora remembered that while she was immortal, Tithonus wasn't. And so she prayed for him the gift of eternal life. Which she obtained for him. But, as so often, there was a catch in the thing. She had forgotten to ask also for the gift of eternal youth. And so she didn't get it. That is, Tithonus didn't get it. So she changed him into a cicada, a sort of locust. I have not the image clear in my mind, but I do remember that Homer compares the voices of the old men of Troy, sitting on the walls as Helen went by, to those of crickets. Myself could not tell the voice of a cicada from that of a cricket anyway.

But how it came that Aurora, goddess of dawn, finagled her boyfriend a steady job with the moon, I can't say. Seems as though Diana was just a pushover for a hard-luck story, doesn't it? Think of this, when the moon comes over the mountain. Or when you hear the voice of the cricket. Or cicada.

However. It occurred to me, even as I was composing these last few paragraphs, that something seemed to be missing. So I went to a book called *Who's Who In The Ancient World*, and looked up Tithonus. Ye Ed claims that there were *two* guys of that name! Claims that the lover of the dawn and the brother of the King of Troy were not the same. Also uses the Greek name *Eos* instead of the Latin one *Aurora*. "Eos asked Zeus to make [Tithonus] immortal but forgot to ask for perpetual youth for him, so that he gradually became greyer and more shrivelled until she tired of looking after him, turned him into a cicada and shut him up in a cage." Evidently she didn't think much of the proverb, *It is better to be an old man's darling than a young man's toy.* Besides, she had other lovers. Ye Ed calls the story, "This sinister legend . . ." Hard to disagree. But what is the connection with the *moon*? I returned to my original notes (as distinct, then, from my un-original notes?) and found, referring to Dante's *Purgatorio,* these clearly-written items: "P. 140, C[anto] IX, '11.1-9 [. . .] The lunar Aurora, or Moon-Dawn—called 'the concubine of old Tithonus' "—etc., etc., as I've said before. Much help this is. Either Dante and his commentators made some mistake not clear to me, or else to Dante a dawn was a dawn and an aurora an aurora and so he did not distinguish between that of the sun and that of the moon, or—and I assume this is likeliest—my ignorance veils from me that which was visible to both Dante *and* his commentators, to wit that Eos/Aurora simply made some sort of *deal* with Artemis/Diana. "Sisters help Sisters," eh, girls? In my opinion Tithonus didn't have a hell of a lot to bitch about, he would've died anyway, and meanwhile there had been all those wonderful nights with Aurora/Eos, before the invariable words, "Sorry, honey, got to split now. Time to go to *work.*"

Even bees don't lick honey all the time, or, Shine on, harvest moon . . .

Aristotle and the moon. Aristotle has so much to say on just about everything, with the possible exception of the parking problems on our campuses, that I would hesitate to open his works and examine the index under M. So I will mention that which you already know, which is that in the Middle Ages Science meant Aristotle, and if he is not the best there is, well, he was the best there was. And among the things which he said, he said that a lunar rainbow only occurs once in fifty years. And it bechanced, during a year the number of which I know not, that someone happened to observe *two* lunar rainbows in one single year! From that moment, it may be said, dates the decline of Aristotle as the main scientific authority, and it was left for Galileo to finish off the job—in doing which, of course, he finished off Ptolemy, too.

Are you feeling hungry? Listen to this, would you. "[The upper-class Romans] . . . ate, as an appetizer, wild boar surrounded by turnips, lettuces, radishes and fish . . . a cheese-cake or two . . . lamprey in a sauce made of shrimps, fish roes, pepper and vinegar, boiled in a five-year-old wine . . . [livers] of fish fattened on figs, crane's legs, hare's legs," recall the hare was sacred to Diana and the moon? ". . . roast blackberries . . . roast pigeons. The meal was rounded off by *apples picked by the light of the waning moon* . . ." —When, perhaps, they were deemed less watery.

Remember Apis, the sacred bull? Remember, although I haven't mentioned him so far, Osiris? He was the husband of Isis, whose crescent headdress—but let me read you of a backward view of the religious syncretism which followed the Greek conquest of Egypt, when Osiris and Apis were combined and worshipped under one name: ". . . Serapis, a devil worse than any, who, liking [Alexandria], had summoned his wife and child and established them on a cliff to the north, within sound of the sea. The child never spoke. The wife *wore the moon*. [Italics mine.—A.D.] In their honor the Alexandrians used to come out along the canal in barges and punts, crowned with flowers, robed in gold, and singing spells of such potency that the words remained, though the singers were dead . . ."* A splendid image. But, somehow, what stays most with me is the mention of that silent child . . .

Silently, silently, now the moon
Walks the earth in her silvery
shoon . . .

Well, one could go on for almost ever. The moon is older than we are. So let me conclude with a few words from another student of moon lore, the Rev. Timothy Harley. "The moon, whose mildness of lustre enticed attention, whose strange spots seemed shadowy pictures of things and beings terrestrial, whose appearance amid the darkness of night was so welcome, and who came to men susceptible, from the influences of quiet and gloom, of superstitious imaginings, from the very beginning grew into a familiar spirit of kindred form with their own, and though regarded as the subordinate and wife of the sun, was reverenced as the superior and husband of the earth."

---

*E. M. Forster, "Pharos And Pharillon,"

So. If He or if She, if containing a hare or containing a toad and even now alas containing the discarded trash of the giant step forward for mankind, the moon is perhaps our oldest friend. I think of people who want to use up the moon by building giant space colonies. I think of the influences of the tides. I look up into the tideless skies. I say, to whomever may be listening, "Hey. Leave the moon alone. You hear?" ●

MOONLIGHT REFLECTION

Bobbing in the sky,
personable and yet
spectacular in its own way, like a toucan—
the moon. Grinning, slowly
easing through tonight's arc of stars.
A pool of chunky light—heaven's forehead—
a delight of textures, a superior
abstract in shadow and line and lampshade tints—I
could go on...

Now, I know some governments keep
massdrivers up there,
on tripwires, aimed at everyone—
deterrence or something—and
I know the Poet's International voted a ban on moon poems
until this threat is gone. But
it's so hard to stay away; ask Li Po.
Anyway,
isn't it traditional for poets to praise
things that can destroy them?
I'm thinking of
revolutions, and royalty,
and especially love.

—Alex M. Jeffers

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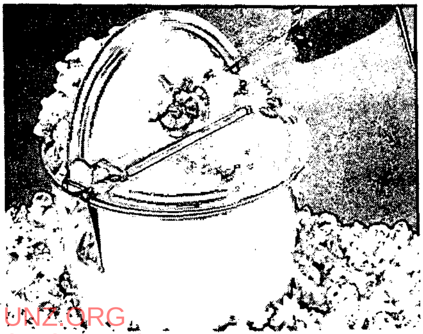

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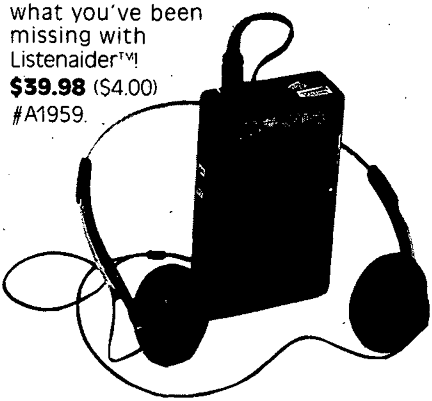

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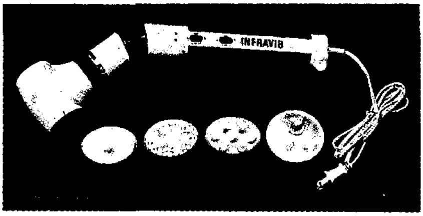

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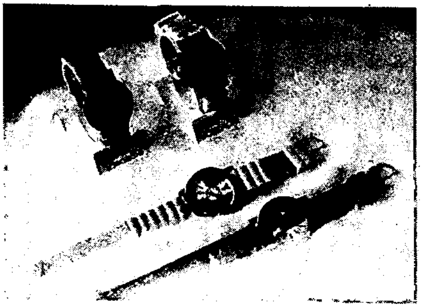

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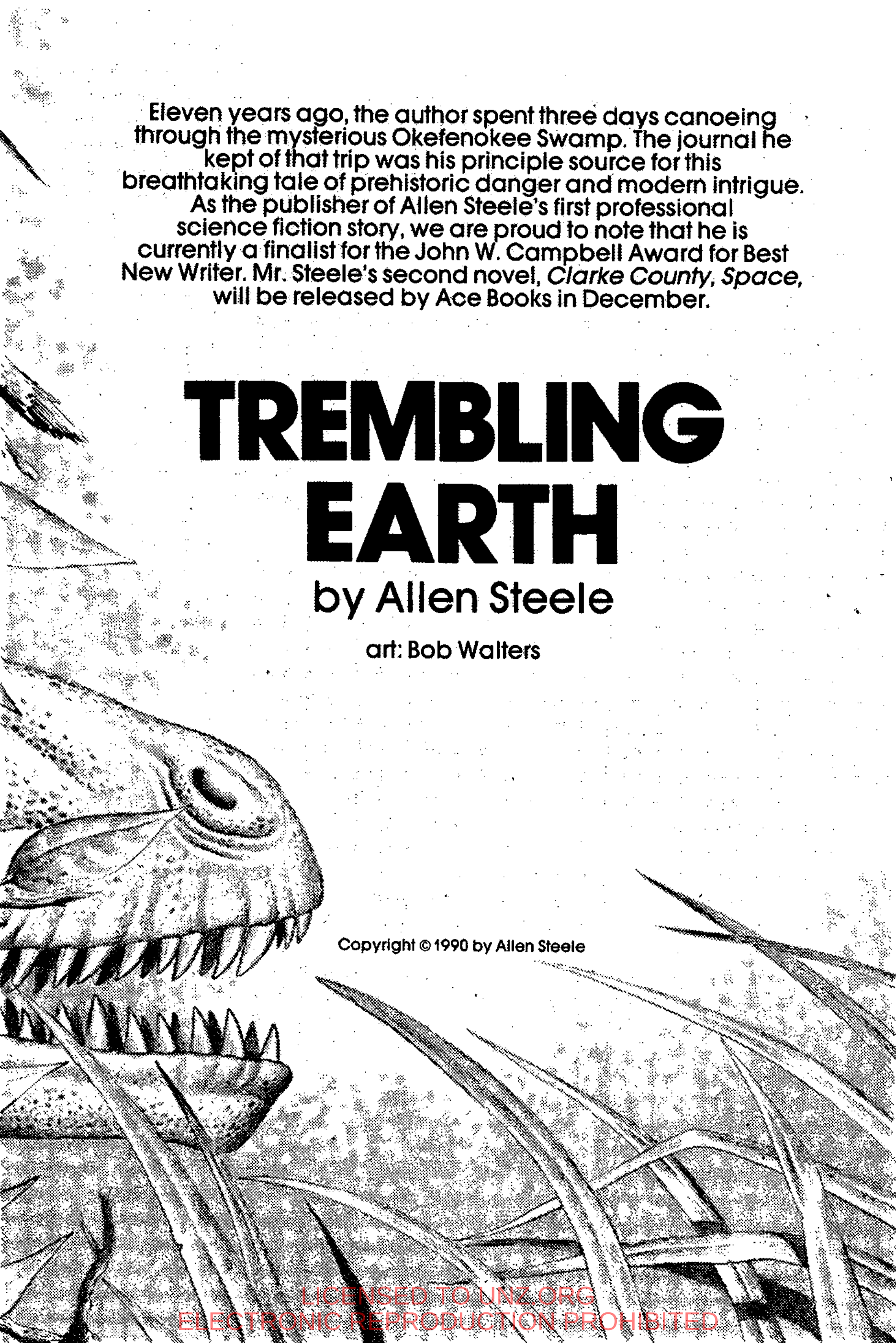
Eleven years ago, the author spent three days canoeing through the mysterious Okefenokee Swamp. The journal he kept of that trip was his principle source for this breathtaking tale of prehistoric danger and modern intrigue. As the publisher of Allen Steele's first professional science fiction story, we are proud to note that he is currently a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. Mr. Steele's second novel, *Clarke County, Space,* will be released by Ace Books in December.

TREMBLING EARTH

by Allen Steele

art: Bob Walters



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"OKEFENOKEE SWAMP, also spelled Okefinokee, *primitive swamp and wildlife refuge in southeastern Georgia and northern Florida, U.S. . . . The swamp's name is probably derived from the Seminole Indian word for 'trembling earth,' so called because of the floating islands of the swamp."*

—Encyclopedia Britannica

1. The Mesozoic Express

A high-pitched chop of helicopter rotors from somewhere high above the treetops, the faint invisible perception of drifting on still waters, hot sunlight on his face and cold water on his back. An amalgam of sensations awakened Steinberg, gradually pulling him from a black well. Awake, but not quite aware; he lay in the muddy bottom of the aluminum canoe and squinted up at the sunlight passing through the moss-shrouded tree branches. His clothes were soaked through to the skin and even in the midday sun he was chilled, but somehow that didn't register. All that came through his numbed mind was the vague notion that the canoe was drifting downstream, bobbing like a dead log in the current of the. . . .

Where was he? What was the name of this place? *Suwannee Canal,* a voice from the fogged depths of his mind informed him. Yeah. Right. The Suwannee Canal. How could have he forgotten? "Up shit creek and no paddle," another voice said aloud. It took him a moment to realize that the voice was his own.

The helicopter seemed to be getting closer, but he couldn't see it yet. Well, if I'm drifting, maybe I need to find a paddle. Steinberg sat up on his elbows and his eyes roamed down the length of the canoe. Muddied backpacks, soaked and trampled sleeping bags, a rolled-up tent, a propane lantern with a broken shield, a black leather attaché case which for some reason looked entirely appropriate here . . . but no paddle. Must have fallen out somewhere back there. Yes, Denny, you're definitely up shit creek. . . .

That's a joke, kid. The new voice in his head belonged to Joe Gerhardt. *Laugh when the man tells you a joke. . . .*

No. Don't think about Joe. Don't think about Pete. He shook his head and instantly regretted it; it felt as if someone had pounded a railroad spike through his brain. He winced, gasping a little at the pain. Aspirin. Tiffany has the aspirin bottle. . . .

Where's Tiffany? The thought came through in a rare instant of clarity. *Where's Tiffany? She was right behind me when we were running, she was right behind when. . . .*

Something bumped the bottom of the canoe, behind his head. He slowly looked around, his gaze traveling across sun-dappled water the color of tea, and saw the long, leathery head of an alligator just below the gunnel of the canoe, slit-pupiled green eyes staring up at him. Startled, Denny jerked upward a little and the gator disappeared beneath the water without even a ripple. If his hand had been dangling in the water the gator could have chomped it off, yet somehow Denny wasn't frightened. Just old man gator, coming by to visit his canoe without a paddle here on shit creek. . . .

Where's Tiffany?

Now the sound of rotors was much louder. The exertion and the headache had drained him; feeling as if all life had been sucked from his bones, Steinberg sank back into the bottom of the canoe, the back of his throbbing head finding a cool puddle of water. Mosquitoes purred around his ears and before his eyes, but he couldn't find the strength to swat them away. He stared back up at the blue sky and listlessly watched as the twin-prop Osprey hove into view above the treetops. I know that thing, he thought. I was in it just yesterday. Me . . . and Joe Gerhardt . . . and Pete Chambliss. . . .

And now he really didn't want to think about them. Especially not about what happened to them, because if he did he might remember the sound of jaws tearing into flesh, of screams that go on and on and on . . . and if that happened he might just jump right out of the canoe and take his chances with mister old man alligator, because even if he didn't know what happened to Tiffany, he *knew* what happened to Gerhardt and the Senator. And that's not a joke, kid. That's not funny at all. . . .

He watched as the Osprey grew closer and found to his relief that there was a little mercy to be found in shit creek, because his eyes closed and he rediscovered the bliss of oblivion.

Transcript of the Kaplan Commission Hearings on the Assassination of Senator Petrie R. Chambliss; Washington D.C., July, 2004. George Kaplan, former United States Attorney General, presiding.

From the testimony of Daniel Steinberg, former legislative aide to Sen. Chambliss.

KAPLAN: Thank you for being here with us today, Mr. Steinberg. The commission realizes that you're involved in serious litigation in regards to this incident, so we're especially appreciative of the effort you've taken to speak to us.

STEINBERG: Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

KAPLAN: Many of the facts of this case are already known to us, Mr. Steinberg, both from public accounts and from the testimony of witnesses before you. However, there has been a great deal of confusion and . . . might I add for the benefit of the press pool reporters in the hearing room . . . obfuscation on the part of the media. There has also been some lack of corroboration among the testimonies of prior witnesses. It's important for this commission to get the facts straight, so some questions we might ask you may seem redundant. I hope you don't mind if . . . well, please bear with us if we seem to be beating the same ground that's been beaten before.

STEINBERG: Not at all, sir . . . I mean, yes, sir. I understand completely.

KAPLAN: Good. To start with, Mr. Steinberg, can you tell us why you and the late Senator Chambliss went to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Reserve last April?

STEINBERG: Well, the Senator felt as if he needed to take a vacation, sir. We . . . that's his staff and the Senator, sir . . . I mean, his Washington staff, not the campaign committee. . . .

KAPLAN: We understand that. Please, just relax and take your time.

STEINBERG: Uhh . . . yes, sir. Anyway, Pete . . . that is, the Senator . . . had just come back from Moscow, after his discussions with the new government regarding the unilateral nuclear disarmament treaty. Everyone had been burning the candle at both ends, both with the Moscow arms talks and the presidential campaign. The campaign for the Super Tuesday primaries was coming up and the Senate had gone into recess, so Pete . . . I'm sorry if I'm so informal, Mr. Kaplan. . . .

KAPLAN: That's quite all right. We understand that you were on a first-name basis with the Senator. Carry on.

STEINBERG: Anyway, Pete wanted to take some time off, do something just for fun. Well, he is . . . I'm sorry, he was an avid outdoorsman, and he had taken an interest in the paleontological research being done at the Okefenokee wildlife refuge because of his position on the Senate science committee, so he decided that he wanted to take a canoe trip through the refuge and. . . .

KAPLAN: Excuse me, Mr. Steinberg. The chair recognizes Dr. Williams.

FREDERICK WILLIAMS, Ph.D.; Chancellor, Yale University: Mr. Steinberg, you say the Senator wanted to visit the Okefenokee Swamp. I can understand that he might have wanted to take a break by taking a canoe trip, since I'm an aficionado of the sport myself, but I'm still not sure of his intent. Was it because he wanted to paddle where he had not paddled before, or was it because he wanted to see the dinosaurs?

STEINBERG: Well, it was both, sir. I mean, he could have taken a raft trip down the Colorado River, but he had done that a couple of times before already. And he did want to see the dinosaur project and it was going to be in a Super Tuesday state besides, so the exposure couldn't hurt . . . well, he just came to me and said, 'Denny, what do you say to a little canoe trip down South?'

DR. WILLIAMS: And what did you say?

STEINBERG: I said, 'Sounds great, Pete. Let's go.'

DR. WILLIAMS: And you didn't consider this to be an unsafe venture?

STEINBERG: No, sir. Not at the time, at least. Why should I?

DR. WILLIAMS: I would think that you would want to ask yourself that question, seeing as how you're facing a charge of second-degree murder. . . .

The Bell/Boeing V-22 Osprey which had carried them the last leg of the trip, from Moody Air Force Base in Valdosta to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, had barely settled on the landing pad when Pete Chambliss unsnapped his seat harness and stood up in the VTOL's passenger compartment. "Okay, boys, let's go!" he yelled over the throb of the rotors.

Before anyone could stop him, the senator had twisted up the starboard passenger door's locking lever and was shoving open the hatch. Denny Steinberg looked across the aisle at Joe Gerhardt. The Secret Service escort only shrugged as he unsnapped his own harness, then stepped to the rear cargo deck to pick up Chambliss' backpack. Gerhardt had barely lifted it from the deck when it was grabbed from his hands by Chambliss. Hefting it over his shoulder, Chambliss turned around and pounded Denny's shoulder with his huge right hand.

"C'mon, Denny!" he boomed. "Let's go get that river!" Then Chambliss jumped out of the Osprey and was trotting out from beneath the swirling blades of the starboard nacelle. Two officials from the Deinonychus Observation Project, a man and a woman who had come out to the pad to greet their honored guest, seemed unprepared for the sight of Senator Petrie R. Chambliss—dressed in jeans, red flannel shirt, and hiking boots—suddenly appearing in their midsts, grabbing their hands and pumping them so hard it seemed as if he was about to dislocate their elbows. Their expressions, to Steinberg's eye, matched that of the Soviet Foreign Minister's, when Kamenin had first met Pete Chambliss in Moscow last week. The senator from Vermont was an awful lot to take in one dose.

The Osprey's pilot, who had watched everything through the door from his right-hand seat in the forward compartment, looked at Steinberg. "Is he always this enthusiastic?" he asked loudly, grinning at the young aide from beneath his mirrored aviator shades.

Steinberg nodded and the pilot shook his head and looked away. Just then the rear cargo door raised open and a ground crewman pulled down the loading ramp. A handful of men and women tromped up the ramp and walked to the front of the aircraft. They pulled down the folding seats, barely taking notice of Gerhardt and Steinberg. One of them, a redneck with shoulder-length hair, glanced out through a porthole, then looked at Denny. "That the guy who's running for president?" he yelled. Denny nodded and the redneck nodded back. "Sheeit, I shoulda gotten an autograph. Hey, Jake, gimme a cigarette!"

The guy he called Jake, who had a greasy mustache and wore a John Deere cap, fumbled in his shirt pocket for a pack of Marlboros. "Buy some yourself sometime, Al. Hey, Greg! Take us outta here, willya? This place gives me the creeps!"

"Lemme get rid of the VIPs first, okay?" The co-pilot leaned around to look at Denny and jerk his thumb at the open passenger hatch. "Get going!" he yelled. "We gotta go up again! Time to take the part-timers home and come back for feeding time!"

Before Denny could ask what the co-pilot meant, Gerhardt had grabbed both of their packs and clambered out of the VTOL, holding his straw cowboy hat down on his head against the prop-wash. Steinberg picked up the attaché case containing the senator's communications system and clumsily lowered himself from the hatch, then he dashed out from under the rotors. As soon as he was clear, the engines roared to a higher pitch and the Osprey—Air Force surplus, dark grey with a scowling, cigar-chomping Albert Alligator from the *Pogo* comic strip stencil-painted on its fuselage above the words "The Mesozoic Express"—lofted into the air once again. Denny watched as the hybrid aircraft cleared the treetops, then the two engine nacelles swiveled forward on their stub wings to their horizontal cruise configuration and the Osprey roared away, heading east.

Steinberg turned around and scanned the compound in which he had just been deposited. Once, when the refuge had been open to the general public, this had been a big tourist attraction of southeastern Georgia: campgrounds, a picnic area, a visitor's center and museum, a concession stand and a boat ramp. Now it looked like the last outpost of civilization on the edge of the Early Cretaceous period. The visitor's center had been converted into a main lodge for the University of Colorado science team which presently used the place; the concession stand and picnic tables were gone, replaced by quonset-hut dorms, laboratories, generator shack and the chopper pad. Fresh stumps showed where trees had been felled throughout the compound, which was enclosed by a high fence topped with concertina barbed wire. Beyond the fence was the vast morass of the Okefenokee Swamp—and it didn't look like the sort of place where Pogo Possum and Albert Alligator were likely to be found.

Eying the phlegmlike strands of Spanish moss dangling from the cypress trees on the other side of the fence, swatting away a bat-sized mosquito from his face, Denny Steinberg—legislative aide to Senator Petrie Chambliss, alumnus of George Washington University, owner of a two-bedroom condo in Georgetown and an antique apple-red '68 Corvette Stingray which he'd rather be polishing right now—had to ask himself: How the hell did I get talked into this trip?

Because he had mentioned to Pete that he was once a canoe instructor at a Boy Scout camp in Tennessee, that's how. And because the Senator didn't forget anything. And because if the man goes to the White House next year, Denny Steinberg wanted a new office just down the hall, and that meant buttering up the Presidential frontrunner whenever possible. Even if that entailed going along on a canoe trip in a godforsaken hellhole like this.

Chambliss was still talking to the project officials, his arms folded across his broad chest; he wore a faintly bemused smile on his face as he listened to them, probably because—if prior experience was any indicator—someone was overexplaining things to Chambliss. There was a natural assumption people made that, because Pete Chambliss looked like a barroom armbreaker, he also had the mind of one. At six-foot-four, with the muscle-bound build of a former Notre Dame linebacker, Chambliss *did* have the appearance of a former bouncer. When he had first taken office, his political foes on the hill had tried to smear him with the label "Conan the Senator" until it quickly became apparent that Petrie Chambliss was no Green Mountains hillbilly. Thuggish looks notwithstanding, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was now regarded as one of the most intelligent legislators in Congress. It was only when Chambliss ventured beyond the Beltway that he ran into people who equated physical size with lack of intelligence. That was a handicap in this race; in his sound-bites, the big lug came off as King Kong trying to sound like Thomas Jefferson. The staff was still working on him, for instance, to be careful to use "isn't" instead of his habitual "ain't." But so far, the polls hadn't shown this to be a major liability. Considering that the Republican incumbent sounded like a squeamish English teacher from a prep school for girls, perhaps the voters were ready for—as one Washington *Post* columnist put it—"the reincarnation of Teddy Roosevelt."

Joe Gerhardt was standing about a dozen feet away with their backpacks, casually gazing around the compound. As Steinberg watched, the Secret Service man reached into the pocket of his denim jacket, pulled out a pack of Camels, shook one loose and stuck it in his mouth. Steinberg sauntered over, and Gerhardt held out the pack to offer him a smoke.

"No, thanks." Denny cocked his head towards Chambliss. "Shouldn't you be with your man?"

The two of them had met only this morning when they had boarded the senator's chartered jet at Washington National. Instead of the normal business suit favored by the agency's dress-code, Gerhardt was wearing jeans, a T-shirt and denim jacket. Otherwise, he had the bland, unnoticeable features of a Secret Service bodyguard. He didn't look at Denny as he lighted his cigarette with a butane lighter. "Nope," he replied drily. "Not unless he changes his mind."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Remember when we took a pee-break at the airport? Well, the Senator told me that, considering that this is his vacation and that Secret Service protection was something that had been forced on him, he would prefer it if I didn't shadow him."

Gerhardt exhaled pale blue smoke. " 'It's okay if you're nearby,' he said, 'But if you're close enough to be able to tell the color of my piss, then you're too close.' " He grinned and shrugged. "We aims to please."

"Maybe you should be a little less considerate." Steinberg lowered his voice. "In case nobody briefed you earlier, Pete's been in the thick of some crucial events lately. There's a lot of people who don't appreciate his role in the strategic arms talks and a few would like to see him dead before he becomes President. We've got the death-threats to prove that somebody out there means business. . . ."

"The New American Minutemen Enclave. Uh-huh." Gerhardt ashed his cigarette and cast a wary eye at the compound. "Yessir, this looks just like a NAME stronghold to me, all right."

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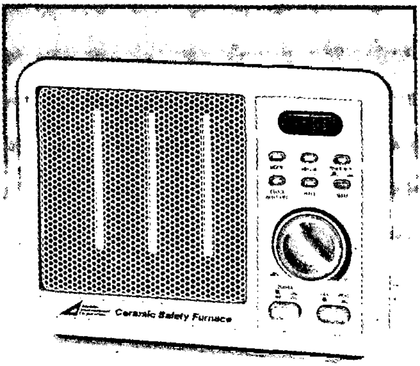
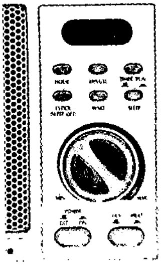
▼ FIGHT THE BIG CHILL





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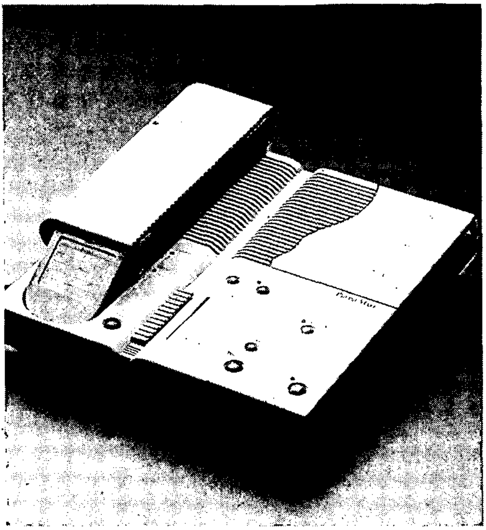

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"Cute. It'd be appreciated if you were a little more observant, okay? Like, do your job? Pay a little attention?"

Gerhardt nonchalantly blew smoke through his nostrils and looked down at the muddy ground. "Looky here, son. . . ."

With his left hand, he opened his jacket a couple of inches. The butt of a submachine-pistol stuck out from the holster suspended under his left armpit. "That's an Ingram MAC-10," he softly drawled, "and I don't think I need to give you a lecture on its specs to show you I mean business, too. But if you don't believe me, there's a buzzard on top of that big cypress behind me, on the other side of the fence." Gerhardt didn't look around. "If you want, I'll pick it off for you."

Denny peered in the direction Gerhardt had indicated. The tree was about a hundred yards away and the turkey vulture in it was nearly invisible against the sleet-gray sky; Steinberg saw it only when it lazily stretched one taloned foot up to scratch its long head.

"That's okay," Steinberg said. "I'll believe you."

"Good. Then stay off my case. I know what I'm doing." Gerhardt took another drag from his cigarette, dropped it on the ground and stomped on it with his boot before walking off. "The senator wants to start his vacation. I think I'll join him."

Chambliss was walking away with one of the officials. The other one, the woman, was walking toward them. Gerhardt politely touched the brim of his cowboy hat as she passed, then looked back over his shoulder at Steinberg. "Get the packs, won't you, son?" he called out. "The man needs his bodyguard."

Steinberg looked down at the three forty-pound nylon backpacks and the attaché case piled on the landing pad. Gerhardt was through with playing porter; now it was his turn.

"Son of a bitch," Denny hissed. He managed to pick up two of the heavy North Face packs and was struggling to grab the top loop of the third pack between his forefingers when the young woman, whose blonde hair was braided down her back and who had the longest legs this side of a Ford Agency model, recovered the third pack from his fingertips.

"Let me get that." Before he could object, she grabbed the third pack and effortlessly hoisted it over her shoulder. "Looks like your pal left you in the lurch."

"Umm . . . yeah. Something like that." Feeling vaguely emasculated, but nonetheless relieved to be free of the extra burden, Steinberg grasped the handle of the attaché case. "I take it you're with the science team?"

"Uh-huh," she replied, starting off in the direction of the lodge. "I'm Tiffany Nixon, refuge naturalist. Team Colorado's out at the Chessier Island observation tower. Bernie Cooper's taking the Senator and your friend out there now. We'll catch up with them after we dump this stuff at the lodge."

A few dozen yards away, Bernie Cooper—a thin, balding man in his early forties—was climbing into the driver's seat of an open-top Army-surplus Hummer, with Pete Chambliss taking the shotgun seat and Joe

Gerhardt climbing into the rear. Gerhardt glanced in their direction and gave him a sardonic wave, then the Hummer started off down the narrow paved roadway leading to the side gate. Denny suddenly didn't mind; he was trading one ride with an SS asshole for another with one of the most beautiful women he had met in a long time. Things were beginning to look up. . . .

"Secret Service?" she asked.

"Hmm? Excuse me?"

"Your friend." She nodded towards the departing vehicle. "Is he the Secret Service escort or are you?"

"Him. I'm the senator's aide. He's the one packing a gun."

She frowned as they reached the lodge's front porch. A second Hummer was parked out front. "If he shoots at one of my gators," she said as she dropped the backpacks next to the pine railing, "I'm going to smack him upside the head with a paddle. C'mon inside and I'll give you a gronker. Bernie had the ones for the senator and the other guy in his jeep, but I was supposed to take care of you."

Tiffany opened the screen door and led him into the cathedral-ceilinged lodge. Ah, so, he thought as she walked down a short hallway past a couple of offices to a supply closet. *This* was the guide they were going to have for their canoe trip. "From what I hear, alligators aren't the worst things we have to worry about out there," Steinberg said nonchalantly, watching as she unlocked the door with a key. "If he shoots at any lizards, it's going to be one of the big ones."

To his surprise, Nixon gave a bitter laugh. "Okay by me. I didn't ask for those monsters to be put in here." The naturalist turned on the light, picked a couple of plastic yellow cartridges the size of cigarette packs off a shelf, and handed one to him. "Clip this on your belt and switch it on when I tell you. You know what it's for?"

Steinberg nodded. He had already been told about the reflex inhibitors. When the dinosaurs were still in their infant state, pain-inducers guided by Intel-686 microchips had been surgically implanted in the pain centers of their brains. The tiny nanocomputers were powered by hemodynamic microgenerators which kept the batteries perpetually charged by the blood flow to the brain. The inhibitors—for some reason called "gronkers"—also held Intel-686 nanochip boards, wired to short-range radio transmitters fixed to the same frequency as the receivers in the pain-inducers and, once switched on, were continuously transmitting a signal on that bandwidth.

If one of the dinosaurs came within a hundred yards of a person wearing an inhibitor, the aversion program hardwired into the microchip nestled deep within the dinosaur's cranium automatically sent a painful electric charge into the beast's nervous system . . . and if the big bastard didn't get the hint and kept coming, the charge continued at quickly increasing intensity until, at approximately one hundred feet, voltage sufficient to knock it cold was delivered into its brain.

The idea was to allow the researchers to get near enough to the dienonychi to observe them at close range without imperiling themselves. Steinberg knew the technology was proven and sound, but it still made him uneasy to trust his life to a plastic box. Idly turning it over in his hand, he noticed a strip of white masking tape on the side; written on it was the name *Nixon*. "Hey, I think I got your . . . uh, gronker. Why do you call 'em that anyway?"

"Um? Oh, it doesn't matter." Tiffany was already clipping the other unit, marked *Steinberg*, onto her belt. Once Denny had fastened his own inhibitor to his belt, she gave it a quick tug to make sure it was secure. "They all work the same," she added. "Don't worry about it. If the ni-cad battery dies, it'll beep three times before it goes down. If that happens, tell one of us and we'll get you out of there. Just don't lose it, okay?"

"Why do you. . . ?" he repeated.

"Because when they get zapped, they go 'gronk' just before they fall down." She switched off the light, relocked the door and walked past him toward the front door. "Well, you guys came here to see some dinosaurs. So let's go meet Freddie and his playmates."

From the testimony of Bernard Cooper, Ph.D.; Professor of Paleontology, University of Colorado, and director of the Dienonychus Observation Project.

REP. PAT McCAFFREY, Iowa: I'm probably the least informed person on the commission about the project, Dr. Cooper. If you don't mind, would you please tell in layman's terms how you and your colleagues managed to revive three dinosaurs from their fossil remains? Isn't that a bit like squeezing blood from a rock?

DR. COOPER: Well, it's a bit of a misunderstanding to typify all fossils as dead rock. Back in the 1980s, it was discovered from the Coleville River dig in Alaska that certain fossils contained what are known as biomarkers . . . infinitely small patterns of the amino acids which were contained in the original bones. Certain chemical processes are used to detect and isolate these amino-acid patterns, and from them we were able to discover intact DNA sequences. The first attempts were made on the remains of duckbill dinosaurs found in the Coleville River dig, but the real success was made when the University located the remains of three deinonychi at an Amoco drill site on the Alaskan North Slope. . . .

REP. McCAFFREY: That's . . . ah, Freddie, Jason, and Michael, correct?

DR. COOPER: Yes, ma'am, that's correct. We were quite excited to make this discovery, of course. Up until then, the only deinonychus remains to be found had been in the Morrison Formation in Colorado, so it was quite remarkable to find three more of this species in Alaska . . . although perhaps not quite so remarkable in hindsight, since the duckbill had been from the Late Cretaceous and dienonychus comes from the Early Cretaceous, so really they weren't so far removed in time, considering the tectonic dispersal of Northern Hemisphere landmasses following the breakup of the ancient Asiamerica supercontinent when. . . .

REP. McCAFFREY: I appreciate your enthusiasm for the subject, Dr. Cooper, but would you please keep to the matter at hand? The revival of the, uh . . . how do you say that?

DR. COOPER: Deinonychi, ma'am. Sorry to digress. Well, to make the story short, we found that the three fossils each had remarkably intact biomarkers which allowed us to isolate their DNA patterns. Using bird DNA as the general mold, you might say, we were then able to genetically replicate the patterns found in the fossils. From there, it was relatively easy . . . although it really wasn't *that* easy . . . to clone living cells of each dienonychus we had found, and from those cells we were finally able to reconstruct their fetuses. It's . . . um, all detailed in the final report to the National Science Foundation which is part of this testimony. The project reached success in 2002 when Jason was born at the University of Colorado, shortly followed by the revitalizations of Freddie and Michael.

REP. McCAFFREY: I see . . . I'm curious, Dr. Cooper. Although it has no direct bearing on this matter, how did these three . . . um, dinosaurs . . . get to be named Freddie, Jason, and Michael?

DR. COOPER: Well, ah . . . *(Coughs)* One of the graduate researchers on the project was a fan of horror movies and . . . uh, given the rather bloodthirsty tendencies of the species, he dubbed them with the names. They seemed appropriate to most of us and so they stuck. It was humorous . . . um, at the time, that is.

REP. McCAFFREY: 'Rather bloodthirsty tendencies.' So you were aware from the beginning that we were reviving a dangerous breed of dinosaur. Is that correct?

DR. COOPER: Ummm . . . yes, ma'am, I have to say that's correct. But we were certain that we would be able to contain them from doing any real harm during the observation period.

REP. McCAFFREY: You were certain . . . *(Sighs)* God save us from fools and research scientists.

There was a lockbox attached to the fence next to the gate, and above it was hung a large wooden sign. As Tiffany Nixon climbed out of the driver's seat of the Hummer and unlocked the box, Steinberg read the sign:

DANGER!

NO UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL BEYOND THIS POINT!

Enter this area with **EXTREME CAUTION!** Stay on the roadways or the boardwalk at all times. Make no unnecessary noises. Do not smoke. Food is absolutely forbidden. Menstruating women and persons with untreated cuts or scratches should avoid this area.

Wear your inhibitor at **ALL TIMES!** In case of failure, proceed to this gate **AT ONCE** and **LEAVE THE AREA IMMEDIATELY!**

Log in when you enter the area and log out when you leave.

Failure to comply with any of these regulations may subject you to criminal prosecution under federal law, punishable by fines (up to $1,000) and/or jail sentence (up to 1 year).

On the bottom margin, someone had hand-written in pen: *Please do not feed or harass the dinosaurs*. And someone else had scrawled below that: *Dinosaurs! Please do not eat or harass the humans!*

"You've got some funny people working here," Steinberg muttered.

"If you say so." Nixon signed them into the logbook within the box. "You can turn on your gronker now." Steinberg reached down, pushed a switch on the little unit, and watched as a green status light came on and the gronker beeped once. Nixon did the same, then she pulled a two-way headset radio out of the box and fitted it over her ears. She touched the lobe where the bone-convection mike rested against her upper jaw, softly said something that Steinberg didn't catch, then locked the box and walked around in front of the car to unlock the gate and swung it open. Steinberg obligingly drove the Hummer through the gate and Nixon shut the gate behind them and relocked it.

The roadway was getting more narrow now, invaded by dense vegetation which had not been trimmed back in some time. They passed picnic sites which had been usurped by tall grass and weeds; a wooden sign with an arrow pointing to the Peckerwood Trail was almost completely overwhelmed by vines. Through the trees and underbrush he could see aluminum fencing and rows of coiled razorwire. The park which time forgot. "So tell me," Steinberg asked. "How did a nice girl like you. . . ?"

"Get in a swamp like this?" Nixon cast him an amused glance. "I haven't heard a line like that since I quit going to health clubs." She swerved the Hummer around a pothole in the road. "Gotta fix that sometime," she observed. "I hope this isn't a pick-up scene, because it's too weird if it is."

"What? Me?" he protested. Yet that *was* his intent, whether he cared to admit it or not. Studying her out of the corners of his eyes, Denny couldn't help but fantasize about a neat little sexual encounter over the next couple of days. A one-night stand in a tent, perhaps; the great outdoors did things to his libido. Pete wouldn't mind—since his divorce two years ago the Senator had made time with some of the more desirable women on the Hill, discreetly out of view of the press—and the trip shouldn't be a total loss. But he was careful not to let on how close to the mark Tiffany had come. "This is probably much the same thing as a gym," he murmured, waving a hand at the jungle around them. "The reptiles here are only bigger, that's all."

"How true." She paused thoughtfully. "I was a lawyer before this. Contracts attorney with Meyers, Larousse & Sloan in Atlanta. I was your typical sixty-hour-a-week legal droid, working my butt off to become a full partner and unhappy as hell . . . all I really wanted to do was paddle a canoe around the Okefenokee on the weekends. I spent each week shuffling paperwork and waiting for Friday when I could load up my canoe and head down here." She shrugged. "So one day I decided to pull the plug. Turn life into one long weekend."

"And become a naturalist in a wildlife refuge? That's a switch."

"I know. The partners still haven't figured it out. Ask me if I care what they think. Anyway, I had been working here for about two years when the interior department decided to turn the refuge into a research center for the project. They canned most of the staff when they closed the place to the public, but as luck would have it they still needed a naturalist who knew the swamps, so they kept me around."

Denny nodded his head, but remembered something she had said earlier. "But I take it you're not happy about the dinosaurs."

"Take it any way you want," Tiffany said noncommitally. She slapped the steering wheel with her hands. "So here I am . . . and here we are."

The other Hummer was parked next to a trail head; she steered their own vehicle off the road, switched off the engine, and climbed out. As Steinberg got out and joined her on the edge of the raised wooden boardwalk leading into the brushes, he heard the clatter of distant rotors. "C'mon," Tiffany said, heading down the boardwalk to a gate in the fence. "It's almost time for the main event."

"Hmm?" Denny shaded his eyes with his hand and peered up at the sky. Was that the Osprey coming back? The swamp seemed more dense now, as if the green maze was moving in around them like the fronds of a pitcher plant curling in around its prey. "What's that?"

"Feeding time," Tiffany said. "You'll love it." She opened the unlocked gate and looked over her shoulder at him. "Just like one of the budget hearings back in D.C."

It was the second time that day he had heard about feeding time, but she was already striding down the boardwalk before he could ask what she meant. He hurried to catch up with her.

From the testimony of Dr. Bernard Cooper.

KAPLAN: We realize that you're upset with Rep. McCaffrey's characterization of the project as reckless, in regards to the species of dinosaur which your team revived. . . .

DR. COOPER: 'Upset' isn't the word for how I feel, Mr. Kaplan. . . .

KAPLAN: . . . Yet you have to realize that the burden of proof is upon you to convince this commission that the project was not reckless, that you had taken adequate safeguards to protect visitors to the refuge. . . .

DR. COOPER: Mr. Kaplan, the primary goal of Dienonychus Observation Project was not to establish a dinosaur petting zoo. When the Department of the Interior leased the Okefenokee refuge to the project, we did our best to make sure that the specimens would be isolated from the outside world and that the scientists conducting the observations would be thoroughly protected from the dinosaurs. Besides the fact that the Okefenokee Swamp was the most available site that approximately matched the natural environment of the Early Cretaceous era, it was also selected because of its isolation. Safety was a top priority and a considerable part of our NSF budget was spent on just that priority. The refuge was hemmed in with high fences that allowed limited access to the swamp. Waterways such as Suwannee Canal were equipped with underwater fences to keep the dinosaurs from swimming out, even though this species isn't amphibious by nature. Roads were blocked to prevent vehicles from entering so that entrance to the refuge could only be made by aircraft. The specimens themselves were surgically implanted with the electronic inhibitors I described earlier. Every precaution imaginable was taken to prevent injury or death to anyone entering the refuge. . . .

KAPLAN: And yet. . . .

DR. COOPER: Please allow me to finish, sir. We anticipated that we might have some privileged visitors to the project, such as members of Congress who oversee the National Science Foundation, and we were thoroughly prepared to make certain that they were safe. However, I must point out to the commission that we did not expect that a presidential candidate might decide to spend his vacation with us, let alone one who might be a target for assassination by a right-wing extremist group. We did not invite Senator Chambliss and his party to the refuge. To be quite blunt, Mr. Kaplan, if it had been within my power to do so, I would have refused to let him in.

KAPLAN: Then why did you allow the late senator to visit you?

DR. COOPER: Because the project is at the mercy of congressional funding, and we need all the friends on Capitol Hill we can get. You know the old saw about where an eight-hundred-pound gorilla wants to sit? Mr. Kaplan, with all due respect to the deceased, he was an eight-hundred-pound gorilla. He sat wherever he damned well pleased.

Under the rattle of the approaching aircraft, Steinberg heard the voices of the science team as he and Nixon arrived at the end of the boardwalk.

"Pack acquired at three-ten degrees northwest, downrange two-point-two miles. . . ."

"Onboard telemetry good. We've got a clear fix. They're still in the trees. . . ."

"Okay, bring in the Osprey for the drop. . . ."

The observation platform looked like a giant pinewood treehouse, perched fifty feet above the ground on the big-toe of the foot-shaped Chessier Island. A high steel fence and more razorwire surrounded the platform; Denny was suddenly made uncomfortably aware of how exposed they had been while on the boardwalk. One of the men on the platform noticed Steinberg and Nixon and buzzed them through the boardwalk gate. Nixon led the way up the spiral stairway to the top of the platform.

The swamp opened up before him as a vast, primordial prairie. The plain of floating peat-moss had been here for seemingly countless years, its mass having gradually bubbled up from the bottom of the swamp to form an almost-solid surface. The edges of the clearing were fringed with pine and cypress trees draped with Spanish moss; the prairie was covered with high, yellow grass which rippled like ocean waves as a warm breeze wafted across it. The rippling grew more intense as the Osprey came in over the treetops and hovered above the plain. A covey of white Sandhill cranes, startled by the VTOL's arrival, lifted off from the ground and flapped across the prairie straight toward the tower, irritably honking their distress, until they veered away from the tower and disappeared beyond the trees.

Under the canvas awning stretched above the platform, a couple of researchers were standing ready around their instruments: tripod-mounted Sony camcorders, Nikon cameras with humongous telephoto lenses, shotgun mikes, a dish antenna, all pointed at the prairie. At a bench behind, a young man with a goatee beard and a ponytail was watching the screens of two Grid laptop computers on a bench, hardwired into a couple of CD-ROM datanests. The reels of an old-fashioned tape deck slowly turned, while a couple of monochrome TV monitors showed close-ups of the swamp.

Chambliss and Gerhardt were standing with Cooper behind the scientists, watching all that was happening before them. Like almost everyone else on the platform, they had high-power binoculars draped on straps around their necks. Stepping over the tangled cables on the floor of the deck, Steinberg walked over to them, hearing Cooper speak in a low voice: ". . . dropping them in just about. . . ."

"Sorry I'm late, Pete," Denny interrupted. "I had to. . . ."

Chambliss impatiently shushed him. Cooper irritably glanced at him, then continued. "The pack won't emerge until the Osprey's gone," he said quietly. "They're pretty shy about the chopper and they tend to hide from it, but once they come out they'll make pretty quick work of the bait. It's not much of a challenge for them. That's why the team has to record everything. It happens too fast to make many on-the-spot calls."

Denny watched as the Osprey settled down to within a few feet of the peat-moss surface. Although its landing gear was lowered, the aircraft never actually landed on the swamp, undoubtedly because the floating surface of the swamp would not sustain its weight. The rear cargo hatch cranked open and he could dimly make out one of the crewmembers climbing out to pull down the tail ramp. Steinberg ducked beneath Chambliss's line of sight and scuttled over to Gerhardt. "What's going in?" he whispered.

"Feeding time at the O.K. Corral," the Secret Service agent murmured, still watching the swamp.

"I keep hearing that. *What* are they feeding 'em?"

Gerhardt looked at him and said, "Mooooo. . . ."

Steinberg glanced down at one of the close-up monitors in time to see the bait being led down the Osprey's ramp by the crewmember: a full-grown cow, its bovine head twisting back and forth as it was dragged out of the hatch by a rope around its neck. "I don't fucking believe this," he murmured.

"There's a ranch in Folkston where they're kept," Tiffany supplied. He hadn't noticed that she had slid up beside him. She handed a spare pair of binoculars to him. "Did you know there's an overabundance of cattle in the country?" she asked softly. "This is how they get rid of the surplus. Feedstock for the dinosaurs." She smiled grimly. "They're not vegetarians and Purina doesn't make Dinosaur Chow, even if they would eat it. And they won't touch dead meat. They like their food fresh, if you know what I mean."

"Don't they get enough to eat out there?" Gerhardt asked.

"Are you kidding? They'd knock off every bear and deer in the refuge in a week if we let them forage, and the ambient ecosystem would be shot to hell. Even the gators are too scared to take 'em on." She grimaced. "Not that they don't try," she added.

"Hmm? The gators?"

"The dinosaurs. They're eating the swamp alive. That cow's just subsistence rations for them." There was an expression in her face which was hard to interpret; there was something in her eyes which was hidden as she raised her binoculars to study the prairie.

Once the cow was on the ground, about two hundred yards from the platform, the crewman hastily pushed the tail ramp back into the Osprey and pulled himself into the hatch. He looked like he was in a hurry and Denny couldn't blame him one bit. The Osprey ascended, twin rotors counter-rotating like scimitars, and peeled away toward the distant compound. Abandoned in the middle of the prairie, the cow watched the aircraft depart. It lowed once, a lonely sound which the shotgun-mikes picked up, and it made a few tentative steps across the wobbly earth until its instincts took over and it began to graze on the tops of the high grass. The ASPCA would just *love* this, Steinberg thought, as a chill swept between his shoulder blades.

"We've got movement at three-twelve degrees northwest," the Team Colorado researcher watching the computers said. "Downrange two-point-one miles and closing. They're coming in."

"Okay, it's lunchtime." Cooper absently twirled his index finger in the air. "Recorders on. Andy, logon DinoRAM. Look sharp, boys and girls."

As the researchers switched on the camcorders and focused in on the cow, the young man behind the computers tapped codes into one of the Grids which brought a new, map-like display onto one of the screens. Looking over his shoulder, Steinberg recognized the general geography of the Chessier Prairie, with tiny blinking spots denoting the locations of the heifer and the three monsters lurking just out of sight in the far treeline.

"It's called DinoRAM," Cooper quickly said to Chambliss. "It runs off the transceiver in their inhibitors. We use it to mimic the feeding habits of Jason, Michael, and Freddie. In the collect mode Andy's running, we can instantly file new data from this day's feeding activity, then rerun it through the computer at our leisure, putting in different stimulae, weather variables, and so forth to see what kinds of results emerge, sort of like a simulator. Nice little program."

Chambliss dubiously massaged his chin between his fingers. "Kind of hard on the cows, though, isn't it?" he asked, but Cooper didn't seem to hear him. Denny was about to add his own comeback when one of the researchers spoke up from the camera array.

"Movement on the treeline," she snapped, peering through binoculars at the far side of the clearing. "Three-thirteen degrees northeast and . . . okay, they're out of the trees."

"What type of approach?" Cooper asked, leaning on the back of Andy's chair to watch the computers.

"Walking," Andy replied. "They're bunched together, standard triangle formation." Three blue dots were diagrammed on DinoRAM's screen; he opened a window in the corner of the display and studied a graph. "Seventy-three-point three percent probability that Freddie's in the lead. Lauren?"

The young woman who had made the sighting chuckled. "Good call. Freddie's still leader of the pack. Guess he won another argument with Jason."

Raising the binoculars to his eyes, Denny watched the prairie. At first he couldn't see the pack. Then they moved, and he could make out three sleek, man-sized shapes at the edge of the trees. "Damn, they're a lot smaller than I thought they'd be," he murmured aloud.

"You were expecting Godzilla?" Gerhardt whispered back. But he nodded in agreement. "Yeah. Cute little fuckers, aren't they?"

Suddenly the three deinonychi began to sprint forward, running through the high grass towards the cow. "Here they come," Lauren said as the team members operating the camcorders tracked to follow them. "They're beginning to spread out. . . ."

"Three-prong attack," Andy murmured, watching his screens. "Michael's heading southeast, Jason's cutting off the southwest, and Fred's going straight in for the kill."

Steinberg's mouth dropped open. "Jesus!" he said aloud. "You mean they're *organized?*"

"They're not dumb animals," Tiffany said quietly.

Suddenly the deinonychus to the far right changed course, veered in closer to the cow. "Hey!" Andy cried out. "Mikey's going for it! He's going to get that cow first!"

"Keep your voice down," Cooper said calmly. He studied the action through his own field glasses. "Jack, Jeff, keep a camera on Michael but make sure you follow Freddie and Jason. Don't let any of them out of your sight." The grad students behind the camcorders swiveled their instruments to keep all the dinosaurs in their viewfinders.

Now Steinberg could clearly see the deinonychus pack: each was about six feet fall, with light-brown skin mottled with dark red tiger-stripes, running erect on muscular hind legs, slender forearms tucked in close to their chests. They *were* smaller than he had expected, but their very weirdness somehow made them look much larger, even from a distance. Although each had a total length of about eleven feet, they only stood six feet high; the rest was a long, sinewy tail which lashed about high in the air. They didn't weigh very much, either: an average of 150 pounds, which accounted for their ability to stride across the floating ground without sinking.

In fact, they could have been mistaken for harmless mini-dinosaurs —surely not as formidable as the ruling carnivorous dinosaurs of their time such as the tyrannosaurlike albertosaurus—were it not for their heads. Long and wedge-shaped, with wide, wild eyes under bony ridges and massive jaws which seemed perpetually frozen in a demonic grin, exposing razor-sharp teeth. One look at that face, and all notions of cuteness disappeared: these were creatures which nature had designed to be killers. Land Sharks, right. All teeth and talons. And those *eyes*. . . .

Strangely, they somehow seemed more avian than reptilian. Of course they would, he reminded himself. They're ancestors to birds, aren't they? Yet knowledge of that clinical fact didn't help to shake his unease. They were too goddamn *alien*.

By now the pack was close enough that they could be seen without the aid of binoculars. The breeze shifted just then. It was either because of the wind-shift, or because it heard the swift approach of its killers, that the cow looked up. Seeing Jason coming in from in front, the cow quickly turned and made a waddling effort to run in the opposite direction—only to find that route cut off by Michael and Freddie. Braying in terror, the heifer clumsily veered again and began to gallop toward the observation platform. "Oh *shit,* bossie, don't come this way!" one of the camcorder operators hissed.

"Forget about the bait, Jack. Keep your camera on Michael and Freddie." Cooper was intently watching the two deinonychi, who were practically running neck-and-neck now. "Well, now. Let's see if they'd rather fight or feed."

Freddie's massive head suddenly twisted about on its long neck and, in apparent mid-stride, it snapped savagely at Michael. The shotgun-mike picked up the rasping sound of its teeth gnashing together. Daunted, the other deinonychus slowed abruptly and peeled off as Freddie continue to careen forward at full charge.

"Looks like a little bit of both," Andy surmised.

"Did we get that?" Cooper asked Jack. The researcher, his eyes fixed on the viewfinder, gave him the okay sign with his thumb and forefinger. "Well, Freddie, first blood goes to you again," Cooper added softly. He sounded like a dog-owner proudly watching his golden retriever bring down a rabbit. Denny looked around at Tiffany to say something, but the naturalist had turned around and was looking in the other direction, away from the killing ground.

Steinberg looked back just in time to see Freddie take down the cow. He almost wished he hadn't. . . .

As it reached the fleeing cow, Freddie suddenly leaped into the air, vaulting the last few yards with its hindlegs stretched forward. The cow bellowed as Freddie's sharp, curved talons ripped into the soft hide along its belly and ribs; hot red blood jetted from its side as the disemboweled animal, its stomach muscles sliced open, toppled to the ground. Its death-scream, hoarse and terrified, was cut short as Freddie's jaws closed around its neck and wrenched upward to rip the cow's head from its neck. In a swift movement, the dinosaur hurled the head aside, an unwanted morsel which landed near the base of the platform.

"Oh! It's a dunk-shot for Fred!" Andy yelled.

"Sign the kid up for the Lakers," Jack replied, shaking his head. "Damn."

"Oh my God," Chambliss whispered. He had been watching everything through his field glasses; the binoculars fell from his hand and dangled against his chest. The senator was pale; his hand was covering his mouth. Steinberg himself forced down the urge to puke. Like Nixon, he looked away. Gerhardt continued to watch, but even he seemed to be fighting down revulsion.

Cooper seemed unmoved. "Okay, ladies and gentlemen, that's a wrap," he said. As Jason and Michael moved in to wait their turns at the carcass, the researchers began unloading cartridges and discs from the recorders, jotting down notes on their pads, talking quietly among themselves. Steinberg watched Jack pull his wallet from his back pocket and hand a dollar bill to Andy; some sort of continuing wager was being settled for the day. Denny was sure that they had seen this kind of butchery dozens of times in the past several months, yet he doubted that he himself could ever get used to it.

The project leader turned to Pete Chambliss. "Well, Senator, now you've gotten a taste of what we do out here," he said, once more assuming the aloof demeanor of a professional scientist. "Any questions."

"No . . . no, not right now," Chambliss said quietly. The senator seemed to be recovering his poise, but Steinberg had never seen his boss more at a loss for words. Chambliss glanced over his shoulder at Steinberg and Gerhardt. "I think we'll be wanting to return to the base camp now, if you don't mind," he added stiffly. "We need to get ready for our trip tomorrow."

Cooper nodded. "Certainly. Tiffany will escort you back. I'll be seeing you around suppertime, all right?"

The three of them nodded their heads. Tiffany, still not looking at the grisly scene in the prairie, stepped past them to lead the way to the boardwalk steps. Denny fell into step behind Chambliss and Gerhardt—then stopped, feeling an eerie prickly sensation at his neck, as if someone were watching him.

He gazed back at the researchers. All were busy packing their gear, talking to each other, making notes. But beyond them, on the blood-drenched killing ground a hundred yards away at the edge of the safety zone, one of the dinosaurs was watching them leave. Jason's opaque black eyes were focused on the platform.

Denny took another few steps towards the stairway. Jason's huge head shifted to follow his progress. All at once, Steinberg realized that the deinonychus was *watching* him. . . .

Watching him. Wondering how his blood tasted.

2. Off To See The Lizard

It was light that awoke him this time, a bright shaft of sunlight which hit his eyes as the passenger door of the Osprey was opened. When he awoke this time, he was lying on a stretcher which rested on the floor between the passenger seats. Someone—an older man with a balding forehead and wire-rim glasses—was holding his head steady between his hands, murmuring for him not to move, that he was suffering from a concussion. But he did move his head, just a little, and when he did he saw Tiffany being helped into the aircraft.

She was muddy and soaked; below her shorts her legs were torn with cuts and her hair was matted with dirt. She looked at him with astonishment as she was guided into a seat just in front of him. "Denny," she breathed. "You got out . . . thank God, you got out of there. . . ."

He wanted to say something of the same kind, but instead his eyes drifted from her face to her waist. She was still wearing a gronker on her belt, a yellow plastic box just like his own. . . .

His right hand moved, almost involuntarily, to his own belt, and there it was, the inhibitor which should have protected him, yet didn't. A vague memory stirred in his mind; he bent his neck a little to look down at the unit clasped within his hand. The green status light was still on. He wasn't looking for that. Something on the edge of his memory. . . .

He turned the little box over in his hand. There, on the side of the case: a strip of white tape, marked with a name: *Nixon*.

"Don't move your head," the man sitting above him said soothingly. "Just take it easy. We'll get you back in a few minutes."

Someone shut the passenger door and told the pilot to take it up again. The Osprey's engines picked up speed; there was a weightless bobbing sensation as the VTOL began to ascend. He laid his head back down, feeling the darkness beginning to come once again—but an unformed thought nagged at him through the fog and the pain. His eyes wandered to Tiffany Nixon.

Someone else was peering at the cuts on her legs, but he could see over his shoulder the gronker on her belt. "Here, move a little to your left," she was told. She put her weight on her left thigh and moved so that a deep cut above her knee could be examined, and when she did, Denny saw the white strip of tape on her unit.

Steinberg. Isn't that weird? She's got my gronker. I've got hers. Steinberg . . . Nixon . . . Steinberg . . . Nixon. . . .

"Don't worry," he croaked. "They all work the same."

Tiffany looked down at him then. Her eyes moved first to his gronker, then to her own. Their eyes met and in that briefest of instants just before he passed out again, he realized what had happened down there. . . .

From the testimony of Marie Weir; President, WTE Cybernetics Corp.

SEN. ANTHONY HOFFMANN, California: As you're aware, the commission would like to know of the details of the reflex inhibitors WTE designed for the project . . . that is, the so-called gronkers. . . .

WEIR: Yes, Senator, I understand the importance of this commission knowing these things. But on advice of our legal counsel, however, I need to inform you that this is proprietary information which, if made public, could be of great benefit to our competitors, so WTE's stance is that we're reluctant to divulge the. . . .

KAPLAN: Ms. Weir, I appreciate your reluctance, but you have to remember that you're under federal subpoena to testify to this commission. Failure to relinquish information that the commission deems as useful for its investigation could be punishable by you and your company being cited for contempt.

WEIR: My attorney informs me that we can give you general information about our product in this hearing and divulge further information in executive session. I believe this is a fair compromise.

KAPLAN: The chair recognizes Senator Hoffmann.

SEN. HOFFMANN: Ma'am, the only compromise I'm interested in hearing about is whether the inhibitors you built could have compromised the lives of my late colleague and his party. If we have to put you under arrest to get that information, I'll gladly second the motion.

WEIR: Senator, I resent what you're implying. The inhibitors we built for the project were designed according to the University of Colorado research team's own specifications, no more and no less. They were subjected to rigorous field-testing before they were put into actual use, and once they were in operation we monitored their progress. Up until the incident in question, no failures were reported of our equipment. Not one. If you're searching for a smoking gun, I suggest you look elsewhere.

SEN. HOFFMANN: I've studied the report that WTE submitted to the committee and on the face of it, at least, I have to agree. Under normal circumstances the inhibitors did perform according to the desired standard. I have no wish to start a fight with you on this point. The main question I have, if your attorney doesn't mind, is whether the gronkers could have been tampered with in such a way as to cause their failure.

WEIR: My attorney advises me. . . .

SEN. HOFFMANN: The heck with your attorney, Ms. Weir. Just answer a simple damn question for me. Could the inhibitors have been sabotaged in advance? Yes or no?

WEIR: Yes. It's feasible that tampering could have occurred. The inhibitors can be opened with a set of precision screwdrivers.

SEN. HOFFMANN: Fine. I'm glad we're making progress here. Your attorney seems to be fidgeting, Ms. Weir. If he needs to visit the men's room, I think you can let him go now. I believe we can get some straight answers without his advice.

There had been three of them: a small pack although maybe much larger once, since the others had been killed by larger predators or simply died from disease or old age. They had been hunting together in a deep valley in a place which, one day, would be known almost mythically as Asiamerica. It was twilight when the rainstorm had begun, but they were still hungry and there was still plenty of prey to be caught before the light vanished from the world. Perhaps they were in pursuit of a larger dinosaur like a lumbering tenontosaurus. Perhaps they had simply become lost on the way back to their den.

Whatever the reason, they had been caught unaware by the flash-flood that had suddenly ripped down the valley. The rushing wall of water was on them before they could escape; the walls of the valley were too steep for them to climb, the current too fast for them to swim. Howling their anger at the dark sky, they were torn by branches and battered by stones. In their dying panic, they had clawed and bitten each other. Finally, one by one, their heads went under the surface for the last time. Their lungs filled with cold water, the fire perished from their eyes, and they died.

Died, and were reborn almost seventy million years later, recalled to life in a sterile white lab by the descendents of the little rodent-like creatures they had once hunted. . . .

Pete Chambliss's chair scooted back from the folding table where he had been working, interrupting Denny's reverie. He looked up as the senator picked up his empty beer can. "I'm going in for another one," Chambliss said. "Ready for another round?"

"Umm . . . no thanks, Pete. Still working on this one." He nodded toward the laptop computer on the folding table. "Did you remember to save?"

Chambliss glanced back at his temporary desk, made a self-disgusted grunt, and stepped back across the porch to type a command on the Toshiba's keyboard. Chambliss took the minicomputer with him on all his trips—tonight he was working on a speech for a National Press Club luncheon next week—but he was forever forgetting to save files in memory when he was working on computers. It was one of the little jobs of his aides to foresee this absent-minded quirk. "Thanks," Chambliss said.

He walked across the porch and opened the screen door, then quickly stepped aside as Gerhardt came out. " 'Scuse me," the senator said as the two men sidestepped each other, then Gerhardt let the door slam shut behind Chambliss. Steinberg fixed his eyes on the darkness beyond the porch as he listened to Gerhardt walk onto the porch, pause, then slowly walk behind him. He heard the rocking chair beside him creak as the Secret Service man settled into it. Then, suddenly, a cold can of Budweiser was dropped in his lap.

Gerhardt laughed as Steinberg started, then popped the top on his own can. "Might as well enjoy yourself," he said. "Tomorrow night we're down to noodles and instant coffee." He took a long tug from his beer and indulged in a resonant belch. "God, I just *love* the great outdoors," he added sourly, propping his feet up on the rail.

Steinberg picked the can out of his lap and set it down on the floor next to his warm, half-empty beer. "I thought you guys were trained to endure hardship."

"Yeah," Gerhardt replied indifferently. "But I spent two years in the Marines lugging a gun across Central America. Every night down there I sacked out in some rainstorm promising myself that, if I survived this shit, the nearest I would get to wilderness would be mowing the backyard on Sunday." He toasted the night with his beer. "And so what do I do? I join the Secret Service so I can escort some senator on a canoe trip through the Okefenokee. Same job, different swamp. Talk about justice, huh?"

"Maybe you should have been a lawn-mower salesman."

"Maybe." Gerhardt took another long sip from his beer. "What's your problem, kid? Still upset because I made you carry the luggage this afternoon?"

"No." He took a deep breath. "I'm just upset because I'm stuck for a weekend with a raving asshole like you."

Gerhardt sighed and shook his head. "Jeez. Try to be nice, and look where it gets you." He looked straight at Steinberg. "Well, if it's any consolation," he said in a lowered voice, "I'd rather be somewhere else than with a brown-nosing little yuppie. I'm here because it's my work and you're here because you want to score points with the boss. Okay?"

Steinberg said nothing, but he felt his face grow hot. Like it or not, Gerhardt had scored a bullseye with that remark. He was saved from having to formulate a weak comeback by the screen door opening again and Chambliss swaggering out onto the porch. He held a beer in his right hand and his backpack was slung over his left shoulder. Just behind him was Tiffany Nixon, also carrying a backpack. "Let's go load the canoes, boys," the senator said heartily. "If we do that now, we can shove off a little earlier in the morning."

"Sounds like a right idea." Gerhardt drained his beer, crushed the empty can in his fist, and dropped his feet to the floor. Chambliss tromped across the porch and hopped down the steps. Tiffany threw Denny a quick smile as he stood up to follow, then Gerhardt grabbed his bicep and tugged him toward the stairs. "What's the matter, kid?" he murmured. " 'Fraid you might get mud on those expensive designer boots of yours?"

"Fuck off." Steinberg twisted his arm out of Gerhardt's hand, then walked in front of him. Now more than ever, he wished he hadn't volunteered for Pete's spring vacation trip. But then he glanced at Tiffany Nixon's backside as she walked alongside the senator down to the dock and reconsidered. Maybe a little sweet seduction in the swamp would make it all worthwhile. After all, somebody had to share a tent with her tomorrow night, and since Gerhardt himself admitted that he had a job to do. . . .

From far away, somewhere out in the moonless dark of the Okefenokee, there came a sound: a *grruuuunngg* from a reptilian throat older than time. Denny stopped on the porch steps as it faintly echoed across the wetlands, feeling an unseasonal chill. On the other hand, he thought, tomorrow night I may want to be sleeping with Gerhardt's Mac-10 instead.

From the testimony of Harlan Lloyd Castle; superintendent, Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

KAPLAN: Mr. Castle, can you tell us a little about the permanent staff of the wildlife refuge? That is, who works there and what do they do?

CASTLE: Well, sir, since the refuge was turned over to the University of Colorado team for their research, the staff was necessarily reduced in number, because we didn't have to maintain the campgrounds and visitors center and so forth. In fact, we had to let go of most of our resident staff to make way for the team, so. . . .

KAPLAN: Pardon me, sir. Your resident staff? What do you mean by that?

CASTLE: Those employees who stayed in the refuge on a full-time basis . . . the ones who lived there year-round. I was able to keep my own residence, of course, and our naturalist Ms. Nixon was able to keep her cabin, but our two full-time rangers and the chief groundskeeper were let go. Fortunately the Department of the Interior found them other positions within the National Park System.

KAPLAN: So there was only Ms. Nixon and yourself living in the park besides the university team. Then who did the maintenance work? Mopping the floors, scrubbing the toilets, cooking for the research staff and so forth?

CASTLE: Well, the science team were responsible for their own cooking. When the changeover occured, I told Mr. Yamato *(NOTE: Benjamin Yamato, Secretary of the Interior)* that I would be happy to have them in the refuge, but I'd be darned if I'd supply them with a concierge. *(Laughter)* Was that funny? Well at any rate, as for the day-to-day maintenance work, we had a number of part-time people who came in each day to do the groundskeeping and cleaning duties. And before you ask, they were brought in each day on the same aircraft which transported the . . . ah, livestock for the dinosaur herd.

KAPLAN: I see. And these part-timers . . . were they official employees of the refuge?

CASTLE: If you mean to ask if they were on the payroll, yes, but I wouldn't characterize them as civil service employees. Since it was rather menial work and part-time at that, we hired whoever we could find in the area who were willing to come in for four hours a day. Typically, we had high-school kids, housecleaning staff from nearby motels, locals who wanted to moonlight for a few extra dollars a week . . . that sort of thing. Again, since we were no longer open to the public, we didn't need to have folks who had passed civil-service examinations . . . just people who knew how to handle a broom or a toilet brush and who didn't get airsick when they flew in.

KAPLAN: I see. And was there much turnover for these jobs?

CASTLE: Typically, yes sir, there was. People quit on us all the time. It was dirty work and it didn't pay all that well . . . in fact the Burger King in Folkston paid better wages than we did . . . so we hired who we could get. That's why it wasn't civil-service work. There was so much paperwork involved with getting civil-service employees that we managed to get an exemption from the Department of the Interior for these positions.

KAPLAN: Uh-huh. And did these part-timers have access to all the buildings? Including the storage closet in the main building where the reflex inhibitors were kept?

CASTLE: Out of necessity, yes sir, Mr. Kaplan. Of course, the key-rings were given to them when they clocked in at the beginning of the day and they turned them back in when they punched out on the time-clock. But . . . ah, yes, they had access to all unrestricted areas of the main compound.

KAPLAN: And that includes the storage closet in the main building?

CASTLE: Yes, sir. There were some cleaning supplies which were kept in that closet, so necessarily they had to. . . .

KAPLAN: I understand. One further question, Mr. Castle, and this goes back to what I was asking you about earlier. Just prior to Senator Chambliss's visit to the refuge, did you hire any new part-timers?

CASTLE: Ummm . . . why, yes. One of our cleaning staff, Mary Ann Shorter, suffered a collision with a hit-and-run driver on the highway. She was laid up in the hospital with neck and back injuries, so we had to find a new person to temporarily take her place. A young guy named Jake . . . um, Jacob Adderholt. He answered an ad we had placed in the Folkston newspaper and we hired him. As I recall, that was about a week before the Senator came to the refuge.

KAPLAN: And did Mr. Adderholt come to work on the day that Senator Chambliss and his party arrived?

CASTLE: Yes, he did. In fact, he went out with the rest of the part-time staff on the same Osprey that . . . oh, good lord, Mr. Kaplan, you're not implying. . . ?

KAPLAN: Mr. Castle, did Jake Adderholt reappear for work at the park following Senator Chambliss's death?

CASTLE: Oh my God. . . .

KAPLAN: Mr. Castle, please, did Jake Adderholt come back to work after. . . ?

CASTLE: No, he didn't, he . . . oh, my sweet lord, how could have I known. . . ?

His oar dipped again into the dark water. He pulled it straight back to his shoulder, raised it again and absently watched the cool water dribble off the end of the blade, then plunged it forward again into the river. The canal ran straight as a two-lane highway through the low, monotonous swampland; dredged by an industrial explorer in the 1890s in an attempt to form an intracostal waterway, before nature and lack of funds conquered his efforts, the Suwannee Canal was a liquid path through the Okefenokee. Further downstream, it penetrated the deep bayou of the swamp, the long maze of the swamp, before it ended at a manmade sill and the mouth of the Suwannee River. But that was a long way from here; they had only traveled the first five miles of the canal, and Denny was already tired.

He pulled the oar out of the water, rested across the gunnels behind the pointed bow of the Grumman aluminum canoe, tipped back his cap, and wiped a thin sheen of sweat from his forehead. The early morning fog had long since been burned off by the rising sun; it was close to noon now and the day was getting warmer. An otter had been racing in front of them for a mile or so, occasionally sticking its furry brown head above the water to look back at them, as if to say *nyah nyah nyah you slowpoke humans* before diving and racing forward again. The little animal had apparently lost interest in them, though, because Denny hadn't spotted him in the past half-hour.

"Out of shape?" Tiffany asked and he looked back over his shoulder at her. She was in the stern seat behind him; he watched as she effortlessly made a J-stroke to keep them in the middle of the narrow canal. "How long has it been since you paddled a canoe?"

"Longer than I care to remember," he admitted. About thirty feet behind them, the second canoe was moving down the river. Joe Gerhardt was doing the muscle-work in the bow seat while Pete Chambliss steered from the stern. They had fallen behind because the senator had been constantly pausing to scan the area with his binoculars or to take snapshots of cranes, vultures, otters, and gators. If the Secret Service man had minded, though, he hadn't said anything; like Denny, he had taken off his jacket when the day had become hotter, and now they could all see the Ingram gun slung in the oversized holster under his left armpit. There was also a headset radio slung around his neck; every now and then he had paused to report in, radioing a status report to the compound.

"Catch your breath," Tiffany said. "We'll wait for 'em to catch up." She pulled up her own oar and laid it across the gunnels, then checked her wristwatch. "We'll be stopping on a little island just up ahead, so you'll get a chance to take a breather."

Denny shifted his butt on the lifejacket; they had long since taken them off and placed them on the hard metal seats. "Lunch?"

"Maybe," she said tersely. She was staring off across the grasslands to their right. Tiffany had been laconic all morning. When they had pushed off from the compound just after sunrise, she had done little more than make sure everyone's gronker was switched on. Even though the temperature had continued to rise and all the men had stripped down to their undershirts, she hadn't pulled off her own shirt—which was too bad, since Denny would have liked to see what she looked like wearing only shorts and a tank-top. Their itinerary called for them to make camp on Bugaboo Island tonight—who the hell had come up with *that* name?—then to forge their way through the deep swamp tomorrow until they reached the end of the refuge and, just beyond that, Stephen Foster State Park, where they would be pulling out of the river for good.

If Denny still hoped to have an amorous adventure with her, it would have to be tonight on Bugaboo Island. Yet, somehow, he was beginning to have his doubts. Tiffany seemed aloof today; her refusal to take off her shirt was a bad omen. Maybe she had come to realize that she was one woman about to spend the night with three men and didn't want to do anything which would seem like a come-on to any of them. But he saw her check her watch again and wondered what sort of schedule she was trying to keep. . . .

The second canoe was almost abreast of their own when Pete looked through his binoculars to his right and suddenly pointed. "Over there!" he whispered urgently. "There's the pack!"

Denny looked around. At first he didn't see them . . . then he did, and he involuntarily sucked in his breath. The three long necks of Jason, Freddie, and Michael rose above the high yellow grass, about two hundred yards away. It didn't seem as if they had seen the canoeists as they slowly moved across the floating prairie. As Bernie Cooper had pointed out earlier, the dinosaurs seemed to have learned not to stick too closely together lest their combined weight cause them to sink through the peat moss. It was almost a pastoral scene: the bright clear sky, the noonday sun, the high grass wafting in the soft breeze, the distant figures of the dinosaurs. Like a landscape painted by an insane Winslow Homer.

As he watched, one of the deinonychi—Freddie, he reckoned, since it was in the lead—suddenly darted forward, its head snapping downward into the grass. A moment later, Freddie reared up again, this time with a small animal caught in its jaws; a racoon maybe, or perhaps an otter which had not moved fast enough. Freddie's head arced back, and they heard the wet leathery snap of its teeth as the unlucky creature was eaten alive. Then the dinosaur started moving again as Michael and Jason caught up with him, their heads slowly swiveling back and forth in search of more prey. The boys were out for a midday stroll. Don't mind us. Just looking for an appetizer or two before we go have a cow for lunch. . . .

Denny was distracted by the sudden bump of the bow prodding against the shoreline; while he had been watching the pack, Tiffany had slowly paddled them to the shore. "Get out and pull us up," she said softly, pulling up her oar and carefully laying it in the canoe.

His eyes widened. "Are you kidding?" he protested. "The pack's right over there!"

"Get out and pull us up, Denny," she repeated. The scornful look in her eyes told him that she wasn't joking, and as the second canoe nosed into the shoreline next to them, Pete Chambliss was already loading a fresh disc into his Nikon. Joe Gerhardt half-stood in the bow, quickly scrambled forward with his hands on the gunnels to keep the canoe steady, and clambered off the front of the canoe onto the ground. He shot a look at Denny which relayed an unspoken admonition: *kid, I'm not going to shepherd your camera-happy boss all by myself, so get moving.*

"I hope you *do* know how to use that thing," Denny muttered back, meaning Gerhardt's Mac-10. Gerhardt said nothing, but fitted the radio over his head again and murmured something into the mike. Denny laid down his own paddle and carefully stood up to crawl out of the canoe. He managed to get out without tipping the Grumman, then he grabbed the prow and hauled the front of the canoe onto the ground.

As Nixon began to crawl across the lashed-down camping gear in the middle of the canoe, Denny tentatively took a few steps forward. The mossy ground squished and rolled under his feet as if he was walking on a feather mattress; it was no wonder that it was called trembling earth. Watching his feet, he took another few steps, then his right boot abruptly sank to his calf in the ground as it found a weak spot in the peat moss. He swore and pitched forward, throwing out his hands to catch himself; the sharp, serrated edges of some weeds cut against his palms, making him cuss and flounder some more before Tiffany grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him erect.

"Cut it out, willya?" she hissed in his ear. "Test the ground with your foot before you put your weight on it . . . and keep your voice down."

"Not that it matters," Gerhardt said in a slightly louder voice. "They've spotted us."

Denny looked up again and felt his heart freeze. The pack had stopped moving, and now they had each looked around, straight in their direction. As he watched, Freddie began to slowly move towards them, followed on either side by Michael and Jason. Triangle formation, just as Andy the researcher from Team Colorado had said yesterday.

"This is a really stupid idea," he said to no one in particular. "Let's get back in the canoes."

But Pete Chambliss was already stepping past him and Tiffany, holding his camera between his hands as he negotiated his way through the tall grass. Joe Gerhardt moved to his side, pulling the Mac-10 from his shoulder holster and cradling it in his hands. "It's all right," Tiffany said. "The gronkers will keep them at bay. Don't worry about them. Just try to relax."

"Sure. Right." Tiffany was already walking away, following the senator and the Secret Service escort. Steinberg looked back once at the canoes—an office in the White House *couldn't* be worth this crazy shit—but then he took a deep breath, which did little to steady his nerves, and stepped into the path made by the naturalist. The four of them slowly approached the pack.

Five feet away from the canoes, ten feet, twenty . . . the three dinosaurs were still moving toward them, and although they seemed to be keeping their own distance, the gap between them had shrunk to only a few hundred feet. They moved gracefully through the high grass, like regal reptilian emissaries from a distant time. It was not at all like yesterday, when the observers had been separated from the pack by the tall platform and the security fence. This was to be a face-to-face encounter, and Denny was all too aware that Freddie was his own height; just tall enough to snap out and tear his head off. They were man-sized, yes, but their relative lack of stature was deceptive. These were not men, or even alien lizard-men out of some Hollywood space opera. They were six-feet of agile, steel-muscled predator, more formidable than a tiger, with huge mouths crammed with dagger teeth, and talons that could disembowel you with a single kick. Smart, fast-moving, and viciously, voraciously *hungry,* they were born killers; in their own epoch, they had ganged-up on dinosaurs four times their size and ripped them to shreds.

But they'll stay back, he reminded himself. Tiffany's right. That's what the gronkers are for. Team Colorado's gotten closer than this without any problems. Don't worry about it. Yet he found that his feet refused to move any further, that he couldn't look away from the pack as it moved closer, closer. . . . Transfixed despite himself by their awful beauty, he barely noticed that Tiffany had paused to let him pass her.

Ahead of him, he heard the click and whirr of Pete's camera as the senator stopped to shoot more pictures. "Absolutely incredible," Chambliss said softly. "Just wonderful. It's almost as if they were posing for . . ."

Then, all at once, the pack charged.

◆

3. The Smoking Gun

When he awoke again, it was to cool, crisp sheets against his naked skin, to the acrid smell of antiseptics mixed with the foreign yet unmistakable odor of dead flesh, to muffled voices and a strange pat-pat-pat of some liquid dripping onto a tiled floor.

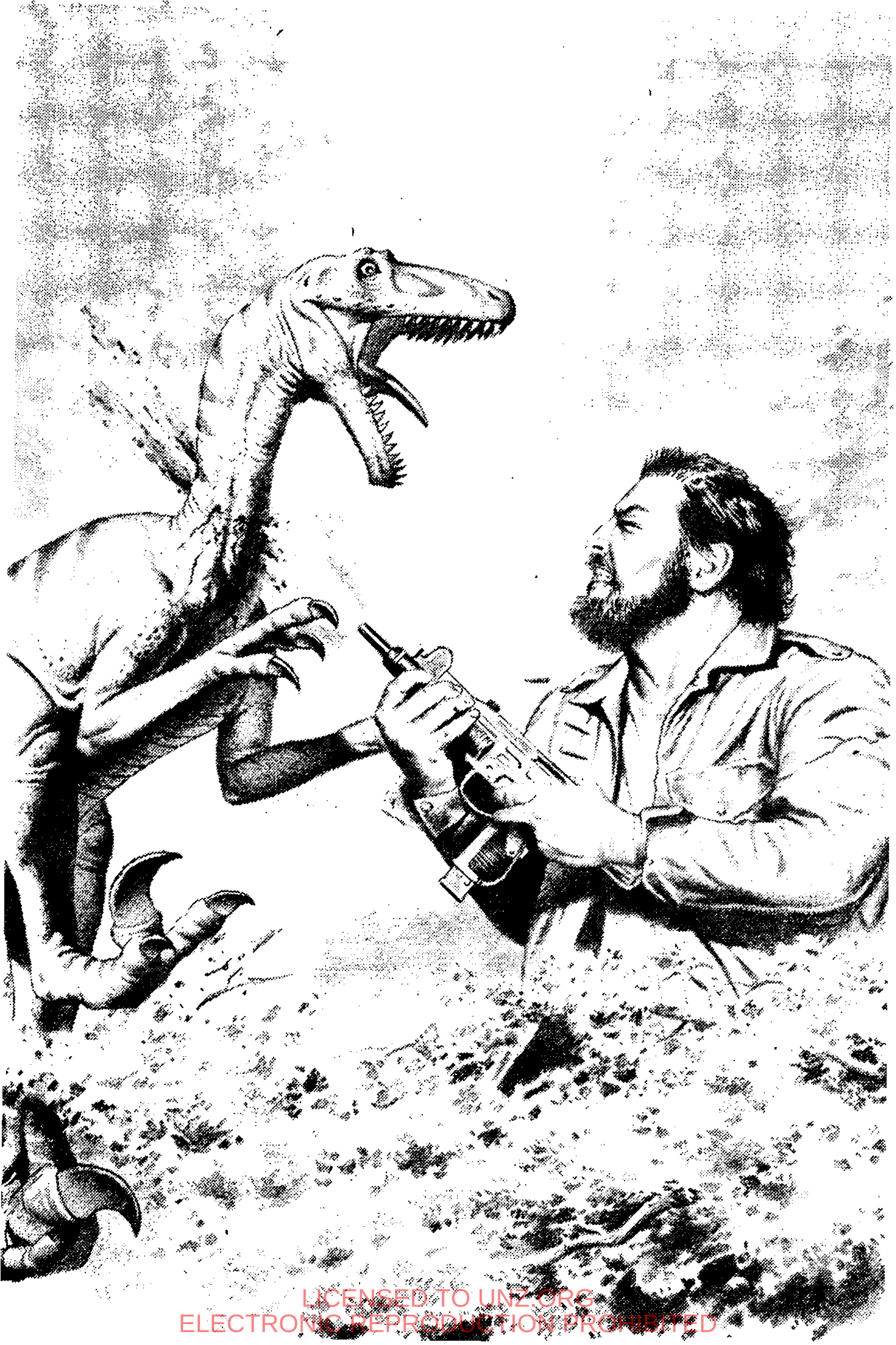
"Oh, Christ, there's not much left."

"Do the best you can." He vaguely recognized Bernie Cooper's voice. "When the feds get here they'll want everything *in situ* that they can get for their. . . ."

"Feds? Secret Service? Jesus, Bernie!"

"Secret Service, FBI, Interior, NSA, probably the Army and Navy and Air Force too for all I know. . . . I've just been told to keep everyone in the refuge and let nobody leave. It can't be helped, Bob. The shit's hit the fan."

He opened his eyes to harsh fluorescent lights reflecting off formica and stainless steel. The light hurt his eyes and his head felt as if it was encased in taffy-soft cinderblocks; it was hard to think, but he gradually perceived that he was in the compound's clinic. Soft pressure across his forehead and the white edge of gauze just above his brow told him that



his head had been treated as well. He moved his head to the right and saw that a screen had been moved into place across one half of the room; the voices came from the other side of the screen.

"If they want us to leave everything alone until they get here, then why are we. . . ?"

"Because I don't want us to look entirely incompetent, that's why. It's going to be bad enough as it is without . . . look, I know they're in bad shape, but I want at least a preliminary autopsy performed before they get here, so just. . . ."

"I can't do that, Bernie. You know I can't. I could lose my license." A slow intake of breath. The sound of a sheet being pulled back again. "God damn, just *look* at him. This is one fucking mess we're in. Did we get everything from the site?"

"Everything. Their personal effects are over there . . . the survivors, too, and we're not to touch them under any conditions. Especially not the gronkers, although we could only find the one belonging to the Secret Service guy."

"Where's the . . . no, don't tell me. I'd rather not know."

The slow pattering continued, just under the sound of the voices. He looked down, peering beneath the bottom of the screen. He could see two pairs of shoes on either side of the wheels of a gurney. Blood was pooled at their feet, seeping into the cracks of the white-and-tan tiled floor, dripping from the tabletop above.

"What about the other two? Nixon and . . . aw, what's his name, the senator's flunky?"

"Shaddup. He's right over there. They made it out okay. I thought the kid had a concussion, but it was just a bad cut and shock. She had to be stitched up some but otherwise she's fine. I saw her out in the corridor just a few minutes ago."

Tiffany. He had to tell someone what was going on. He opened his mouth to speak, but all he could manage was a dry, inaudible rasp. As he swallowed, trying to get his voice to work again, he heard the sound of a sheet being pulled forward again.

"Let's get out of here. I haven't seen anything like this since I interned in an emergency room. Where *is* everyone, anyway?"

"Down at the dock. We managed to get Freddie's body out of there before the animals got to it. I didn't want it on the landing pad, so that's the only place we can examine it."

"More attention being paid to that damn lizard than. . . ."

He heard them walk across the room, then the sound of a door opening and swinging shut. Tiffany. He turned his head again, saw another gurney parked next to his own, but the covers were pushed aside and there was a warm dent in the sheets where she had once lain. She was gone . ... but he had little doubt that she would return. He had seen the look on her face in the Osprey.

He had to get up. Get up, get dressed, go tell someone what he knew before she came for him. Shakily, Denny sat up, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and stumbled to the sink across the room. He cupped some water in his mouth and swallowed gratefully; his throat was no longer quite so parched, his head a little more clear. He was naked; second order of business was to put on some clothes. Didn't the doctor say that his stuff was over there?

He walked across the cold floor to push aside the screen. Two bodies lay side-by-side on adjacent gurneys. He fought back the urge to vomit and was thankful for the sheets that covered them; he could tell that not much was left of either corpse.

There were four large plastic boxes on the counter under the medical cabinets; in them was the clothing he had worn, plus that belonging to the others. As he pawed through one of the boxes, groggily searching for his undershorts, he found the gronker he had been wearing. The one marked *Nixon;* he picked it up, stared blearily at it, then placed it on the counter and reached into another box. Here, the one Tiffany had worn, marked *Steinberg*. Good; he would need to show them to Cooper and the others to convince them of his story.

He placed her gronker back on top of her clothes, then returned his attention to his own clothing. He was about to step into his trousers when he heard the curtain slide back behind him. Denny began to turn around when the hard muzzle of a .22 Beretta was pressed against the side of his head and he heard Tiffany Nixon whisper, "Don't move."

He gasped involuntarily, but froze in place. "Tiffany," he murmured, not daring to even look back at her. "Figured you might be. . . ."

"Shut up," she hissed. "Just get dressed."

The barrel of the revolver was removed from his skull and he heard her step away. He glanced across the counter, looking for something nice and lethal to throw at her. "Don't even think about it," Tiffany commanded, her voice raised a little more loudly now. "The building's empty, so no one will hear if I shoot you in the back. Just hurry up and get dressed. We're going for a little walk in the swamp, you and I."

Denny slowly nodded his head. He didn't turn around, but he heard a creak as she bumped against one of the gurneys. As he pulled up his pants, though, he happened to look at the reflective glass of the medical cabinets above the counter and found that he could see her clearly. Tiffany was still behind him, with the gun trained at his back, but with her free hand she had pried open the blinds of the far window and was peering out, undoubtedly watching the people who were gathered around the corpse of the dinosaur by the boat docks. *Going for a walk in the swamp*. Denny knew exactly what she was implying. "Tiffany," he continued, "you don't want to. . . ."

Her face moved away from the window, and he quickly looked away from the medical cabinet. "I'm not kidding, Steinberg. Shut up and put your clothes on." Then she was looking out the window again. "And hurry up."

"Okay, all right." He slowly let out his breath as he zipped his fly. No way out of *this*. Christ, pal, she's got you dead in her sights. He reached for his shirt, and as he did he glanced down at the counter . . . and spotted the two gronkers he had just found.

Holding his breath, studying her reflection in the medical cabinet, Steinberg carefully reached for the gronker with his name written on it.

From the testimony of Alex J. Cardona; Director of Forensic Sciences, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

SEN. HOFFMANN: Mr. Cardona, I think I speak for the rest of the commission members when I say that we appreciate the hard work the agency has done in this case. For the public record, can you summarize the findings of your lab?

CARDONA: Certainly, Senator. We. . . .

KAPLAN: Excuse me, Mr. Cardona. I believe Dr. Williams has an important question to ask first before you go on. Fred?

DR. WILLIAMS: Mr. Cardona, the senator from California does not speak for us all, I'm sad to say. I've read your draft report to the commission and I'm dissatisfied with one of your key findings. There is an unanswered question which interests every American.

CARDONA: I'm sorry to hear that, sir. How may I answer your question?

DR. WILLIAMS: Let me backtrack briefly, so bear with me. According to your draft report, the deaths of Senator Chambliss and his Secret Service escort were caused by tampering with the reflex inhibitors . . . the so-called gronkers . . . which they wore during the trip. It was found that someone . . . probably this Jacob Adderholt, if that was indeed his real name . . . had managed to substitute defective Intel-686 microchips into their units, ones which had been preconfigured to become inoperative at precisely 1200 hours on the day that the senator's party was scheduled to be in the refuge. It was because of the failure of the gronkers that the deinonychus pack were able to make the fatal attack on Senator Chambliss and Mr. Gerhardt. . . .

CARDONA: That's correct, sir, although it should be pointed out that Mr. Gerhardt managed to open fire and fatally wound one of the pack before he was. . . .

WILLIAMS: I understand, and Mr. Gerhardt will be receiving posthumous commendation for his bravery, but that's been pointed out before, so please don't distract me. Let me continue. Pending the outcome of the final investigation into Jake Adderholt's true identity, it can be safely assumed that he was a member of the New American Minutemen Enclave, considering that his fingerprints match those of a known NAME terrorist. At this point in your draft report, the FBI seems to imply that Adderholt was solely responsible for his death. Am I correct in inferring this from the report?

CARDONA: Sir, the FBI has not completed its investigation of the events in the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. When the agency has done so, we will be issuing a final report which will clarify the findings of the draft report.

DR. WILLIAMS: Mr. Cardona, the director of the FBI has said that the final report will not be issued until at least a year from now. I'm losing patience with everyone involved in this investigation hedging their bets, and I think the public is, too. You found the smoking gun. What I want to know is, who pulled the trigger?

CARDONA: I beg your pardon, Dr. Williams, but it almost seems certain that Jake Adderholt was the person responsible for. . . .

DR. WILLIAMS: I haven't made myself clear and I'm sorry for that. I'll rephrase it as a blunt question. Was Jake Adderholt acting alone, or did he have an accomplice? Was a second person directly involved in the assassination of Senator Petrie Chambliss? Specifically, was it an inside job?

CARDONA: I'm sorry, Dr. Williams, but the FBI isn't prepared to answer that question yet.

Denny stopped the Hummer at the end of the road and looked around over the rear of the vehicle. He could hear the distant aerial chop of a helicopter approaching; the noise grew louder until an olive-drab Army Blackhawk helicopter abruptly soared over the treetops, heading for the compound behind them. He turned back around to see Tiffany Nixon climbing out of the front passenger seat, the gun in her hand still trained on him. "Looks like the feds have arrived," he said. "You know you're not going to get away with this, don't you?"

Tiffany winced in disgust. "Did you get that line from a James Bond movie or something?" She gently waved the gun toward the backpack in the back of the vehicle. "*Sure* I'm going to get away with it. Now pick it up and start walking. I'm going to be behind you . . . and don't even think about trying any 007 shit with me, okay? You've pissed me off enough already as it is."

He sighed as he carefully climbed out of the driver's seat and picked up the backpack—the same one, he noted, that she'd had in the canoe with them earlier in the day. "No need to knock James Bond, y'know," he grumbled as he put his right arm through the strap and tugged the pack over his shoulder like a rucksack. "Besides, I'm still curious . . . are you working for NAME, or is it someone else?"

"And now you're expecting me to play Blofeldt and spill the beans." Nixon was keeping her distance; even if he was stupid enough to try attacking her, she could still nail him before he made anything more than a dumb heroic attempt. "Just start walking. Right hand on the shoulder strap, left hand at your side. Now move."

Denny obediently began to march down the raised boardwalk, pushing aside the last gate and heading toward the observation tower in the Chessier Prairie where they had been only yesterday. He didn't have to look over his shoulder to know that Nixon was right behind him. She hadn't said much to him since she had captured him in the infirmary; once he had gotten dressed, she had escorted him out a back door of the lodge to the Hummer. No one had seen them leave the compound; even if the federal agents were looking for them now, it would still take a few minutes before they guessed that the two of them had gone this way—and even then, they might not immediately suspect foul play. As far as Denny knew, he was the only one who had seen through Tiffany Nixon's deception, the only one who realized that the killings of Pete Chambliss and Joe Gerhardt were not accidental.

He swatted aside some growth with his free hand as he strode down the boardwalk. Denny was surprised at how calm he felt, considering that he had little doubt that she intended to kill him. Would she shoot him, or maybe she was counting on the dinosaurs to do the work? Their gronkers were both switched on; she had taken the one she had found among his belongings in the infirmary.

"No, I'm not with NAME," she said suddenly.

"Excuse me?" He stopped and started to turn around, but Tiffany waved him forward again with the Beretta. "I thought you didn't want to talk to me."

"It's a long walk," she said tersely. "Might as well fill the time." The unspoken addendum was, *And since I plan to murder you anyway, what's the point in not letting you know?*

"But NAME *is* involved," Denny added, trying to keep his voice from shaking. "Am I right?"

A pause. "You're right," Tiffany said at last. "They sought me out because they needed a person on the inside . . . but I'm not with them. A bunch of fanatics, if you ask me."

"Uh-huh. I see." Keep her talking, he thought. The longer she talks, the less time she has to think. . . . He remembered something she had said when they had first met yesterday. "Let me guess," he said, "You're doing this for all the gators and deer and rabbits in the. . . ."

"Don't tempt me," she hissed angrily. Wrong words; he quickly shut up. They walked in silence for another few yards before she spoke again. "For the gators and the deer and the rabbits, right. They wanted Chambliss out of the way because he would negotiate away the nuclear deterrent if he became President, but that wasn't my objective. Having the pack kill Chambliss would help to ensure that the *project* would be ended. This ecosystem. . . ."

She let out her breath; it came out as a nervous rattle. "The Okefenokee isn't meant to be a stomping ground for dinosaurs," she continued. "The Early Cretaceous should remain where it belongs, seventy million years dead and buried. No one should be trying to graft dinosaurs into this world. Nature can't cope with reincarnation, and if the pack survives, the Okefenokee will die."

"But it's research," he argued, if only for the sake of arguing. "It's searching for answers, for. . . ."

"For how many ways a new dominant species can destroy an ecological balance? Sorry, Denny, but I can't allow that to happen. I love this land too much. I've given up too much already to . . . don't stop, just keep walking."

"Hey, I love the balance of nature and all that," he babbled, "but this is kind of a drastic measure, don't you think?" She didn't reply. He licked his dry lips and forged on. "So you hoped that, if Pete was killed by a deinonychus, the public outcry would. . . ?"

"Cancel the project," Tiffany finished. "They'd exterminate the pack and leave the Okefenokee alone."

"So you fucked with the gronkers to. . . ."

"Not me," she said defensively. "There was another person involved who did that. Look, we're far enough along already, so I'll make it short and give you the rest. They told me that they wanted at least one survivor, someone who could go back and tell a story that would make it look like an accident. I was told that only my gronker would work when the time came, but the more I thought about it later, the more it figured that they were lying. After all, I was the only one who could incriminate NAME. It made sense that you would survive and that I had to die. I wasn't ready to make that sort of sacrifice, if you know what I mean."

They had reached the end of the boardwalk now. The platform was only fifty feet away, abandoned of personnel; the vast clearing of the prairie was spread out before them. "Stop here and put down the backpack," she said.

The gate to the enclosure around the platform was locked; he could tell that just by looking, but off in the distance there was something far more unsettling. Denny could see two now-familiar shapes moving in the distance. Jason and Michael, the surviving members of the pack, now that Freddie had been killed by Joe Gerhardt's semi-auto before the pack had carved him up. As he watched, the two deinonychi began moving toward them. They both had recent wounds on their bodies; the late-afternoon breeze carried the blood-scent to Michael and Jason, and they hadn't been given their daily cow. They would be hungry now. . . .

"Hurry it up," Tiffany said. She must have spotted Michael and Jason as well. "Get the pack off, Denny."

He unshouldered the North Face pack and carefully laid it down on the boardwalk in front of him. "So you made sure our gronkers were switched," he said. "In fact, you did it yourself, to be certain I had the defective one and you had. . . ."

"Right," she interrupted. "You can turn around now. Step over the pack first." Denny stepped over the backpack, then turned around to face her. He absently noticed that her hair was unbraided; the wind blew it around her shoulders and face, which now looked older for some reason. She was not a woman, he decided, who was accustomed to murder. "You got it," she continued. "The problem was, you managed to make it back to the canoe, and Michael and Jason can't swim. The minute I saw you in the Osprey, I knew I was screwed. . . ."

"In a manner of speaking," he impulsively replied.

Tiffany smiled despite herself. "Yes, but not by you, my dear." Still keeping her eyes and the Beretta aimed at him, she quickly knelt to pick up the backpack. "I don't like doing this, y'know, but of all the guys on the trip I personally wanted to see become Dino Chow, you're the one. I hate it when guys stare at me the way you do." She hoisted the pack and ducked her left arm into the strap. "And I really despise yuppies."

"But you like gators." Forced humor; the final weapon of the doomed. How many yards were they behind them now?

"They're better company than assholes like you." From not so far behind him, he could hear heavy footfalls across the floating marshland. Jason and Michael, the glimmer twins themselves, were coming in for the kill. Tiffany managed to shrug into the backpack without lowering the gun for more than a few moments. "Anyway, it's time to dust off the contingency plan," she went on. "I hike out of here and you get to be a late lunch. I'd shoot you first to put you out of your misery, but someone might dig the bullets out of your carcass and there's no sense in leaving behind any more evidence than I have to. Mikey and Jason are going to have to do the job for me. Sorry."

Denny wanted to make a smart-ass remark, but his mouth was too dry for him to speak. Tiffany backed up a couple of feet, still pointing the gun at him, then carefully stepped down from the boardwalk onto the mushy ground. The sound of the approaching dinosaurs was growing louder now. Denny could feel his pulse echoing in his ears like aborigine drums. He glanced at her waist, saw the gronker with his name written on the tape on its side, made himself look away. Don't guess, don't guess, please don't guess. . . .

Tiffany was staring over his shoulder. "Gotta run," she said. "As they say in the movies, 'Goodbye, Mr. Bond'. . . ." She stopped; for a moment there was a look of sympathy in her eyes. "I hope it's quick." Then she was off the boardwalk; turning around, she bolted for the treeline behind them, clumsily running across the trembling earth.

Denny glanced over his shoulder. The deinonychi were hurtling straight toward him; now they seemed to have grown, swelling monstrously, taking on the dimensions of the fabled tyrannosaurus rex. He could smell the fetid stink of them, saw their cold, crazy eyes, their dagger-jawed mouths agape and drooling ooze, their powerful legs pummeling the peat-moss ground like jackhammers, their forelegs with razor-sharp claws outstretched to grab, tear—*oh god oh god oh god what if I'm wrong*—and threw himself flat onto the boardwalk, covering his head with his arms. . . .

And howled with what he half-expected to be his last breath, *"I switched the gronkers!"*

He kept his head down, even after Jason and Michael leaped across the far end of the boardwalk—completely ignoring him—and hurled themselves toward Tiffany. He shut his eyes and lay still as death even when he heard the futile low-caliber gunshots, her screams, the sound of ripping flesh. . . .

From the testimony of Daniel Steinberg

KAPLAN: In closing, Mr. Steinberg, I would like to extend the appreciation of this commission for your cooperation. You've been most helpful in resolving some of the unanswered questions of this event.

STEINBERG: Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

KAPLAN: We realize that you have personally suffered from your ordeal, both in terms of cost to your liberty and your reputation. I'm referring, of course, to the charges of second-degree murder which have been pressed against you by the federal circuit court in Georgia regarding the death of Tiffany Nixon. I cannot give you any guarantees, but I think your testimony here today may have some favorable bearing on your legal case. Frankly, considering the continuing FBI investigation of the matter, I would be rather surprised if the charges aren't dropped in their entirety. In fact, I expect that you will receive vindication for your role in this affair.

STEINBERG: I certainly hope so, sir, and I appreciate your support. Yet before I leave, may I make a final observation?

KAPLAN: Of course.

STEINBERG: I've noticed that, during these hearings, there has been some discussion of terminating the project . . . that, because the deinonychus pack caused the deaths of Pete Chambliss and Joe Gerhardt, the dinosaurs should be exterminated themselves. I believe this has also become a matter of public debate. . . .

KAPLAN: We're aware that the public is interested in the fate of the dinosaurs. Since these hearings have started, this commission has been deluged with letters defending their right to live, mainly from members of the scientific community and animal-rights activists. On the other hand, I happened to catch a radio call-in talk show just last night in which the subject was addressed, and by a three-to-one margin the callers favored exterminating the pack. . . .

STEINBERG: I caught that same discussion too, sir, but I'm not certain whether this is an issue which should be decided by the *Larry King Show*. It makes about as much sense as the proposal to rename the refuge as the "Pete Chambliss Memorial Wetlands" *(Laughter)*. I don't think Pete would have appreciated that. . . .

KAPLAN: I tend to agree, Mr. Steinberg. . . .

STEINBERG: The point is, Mr. Kaplan, that the dinosaurs were as much pawns in this . . . um, matter as I was. If the pack is exterminated and the research project is discontinued, then in the end Tiffany . . . that is, Ms. Nixon . . . would have succeeded in what she was trying to do. The Colorado project was begun in the name of scientific inquiry. It would be a waste to abandon it because someone tried to turn the dinosaurs into a murder weapon.

KAPLAN: But they *did* murder two men, Mr. Steinberg. Three people if you count Ms. Nixon. That's the undeniable fact.

STEINBERG: Only because killing is inherent to their nature. They can't help themselves . . . they came from a different world than ours. If the pack is exterminated and the project is discontinued, then the bitter irony will be that Tiffany Nixon succeeded in the end. The dinosaurs will be lost to an act of terrorism.

KAPLAN: Mr. Steinberg, you may be correct. I can't fault your logic. Yet I'm afraid you're much too late in making your case for the dinosaurs.

STEINBERG: What? . . . I'm sorry, sir, but I don't understand what you're. . . .

KAPLAN: This morning the Georgia State Legislature decided that the two surviving members of the deinonychus pack should be treated the same way we treat wild or domesticated animals that have caused the death of a human being. We understand that . . . uh, Jason and Michael were both destroyed at nine o'clock this morning, about the time you began your testimony.

STEINBERG: I wasn't told. . . .

KAPLAN: I'm sorry, Mr. Steinberg . . . and I believe Ms. McCaffrey would like to be recognized by the chair. Congresswoman?

McCAFFREY: I'm surprised by your last-minute plea for clemency for the dinosaurs, Mr. Steinberg. You witnessed the horrible deaths of Mr. Gerhardt and your friend and political mentor with your own eyes. If you had not turned the tables on Ms. Nixon, you would have met the same fate yourself. Perhaps you've had a change of mind in the meantime?

STEINBERG: Ummm . . . no, I don't think I've had a change of mind, Ms. McCaffrey. It's just that . . . well, I just don't believe science should be the victim of politics.

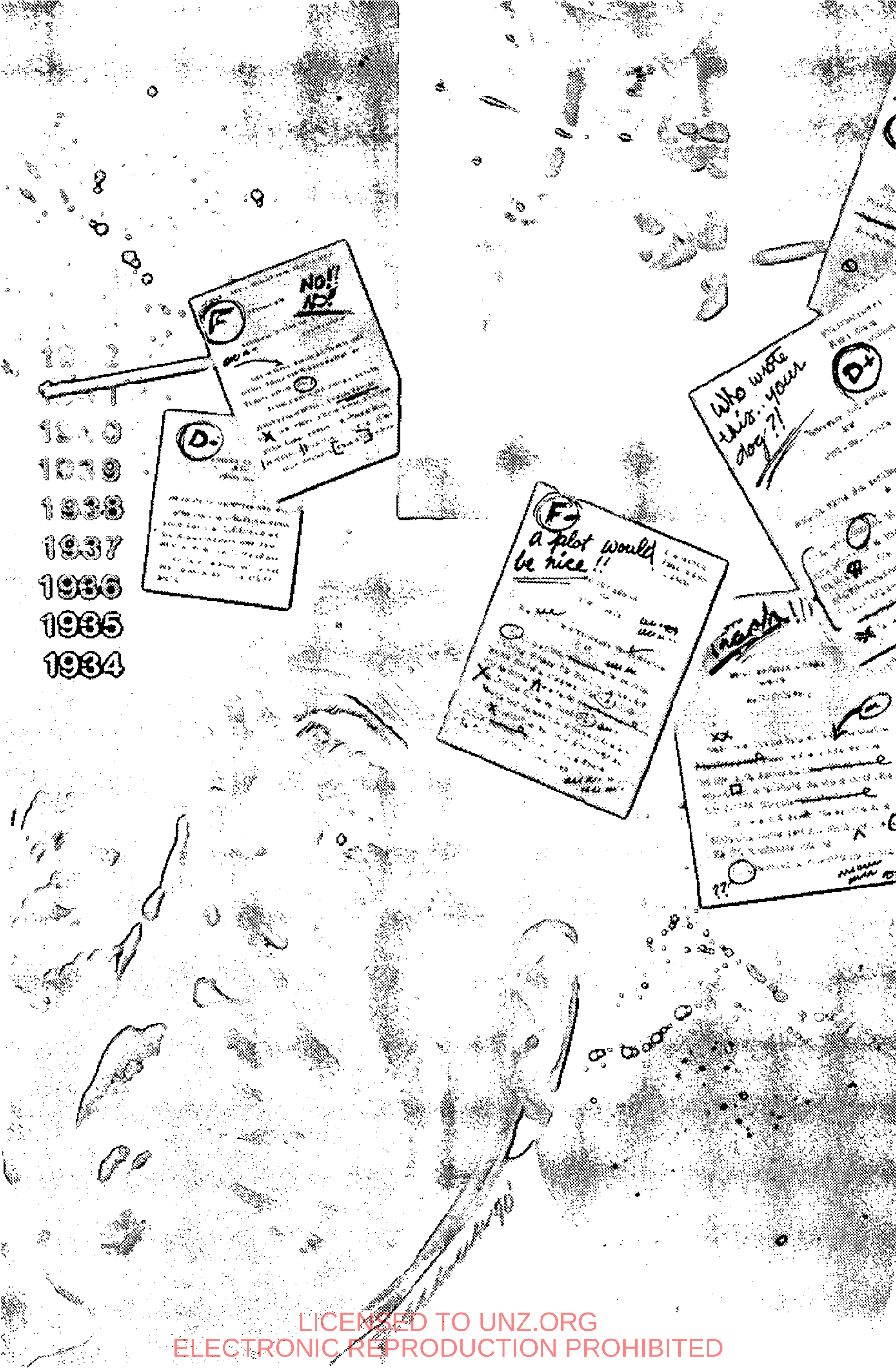
McCAFFREY: Mr. Steinberg, we'll have to forgive you for your innocence of youth. That is much too rash of a statement. When has science ever been the victim of politics?

STEINBERG: Ma'am, I think you've got it wrong. The question should, when has science *never* been the victim of politics?

McCAFFREY: I see. . . . Mr. Kaplan, I would like to make a motion for adjournment.

KAPLAN: The motion is seconded and passed. These hearings are adjourned until tomorrow. ●

(The author wishes to thank Bob Liddil, Terry Kepner, John Morrissey, James Patrick Kelly, Donald Edwards, my sister Rachel Steele, and the staff of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge for their aid and assistance.)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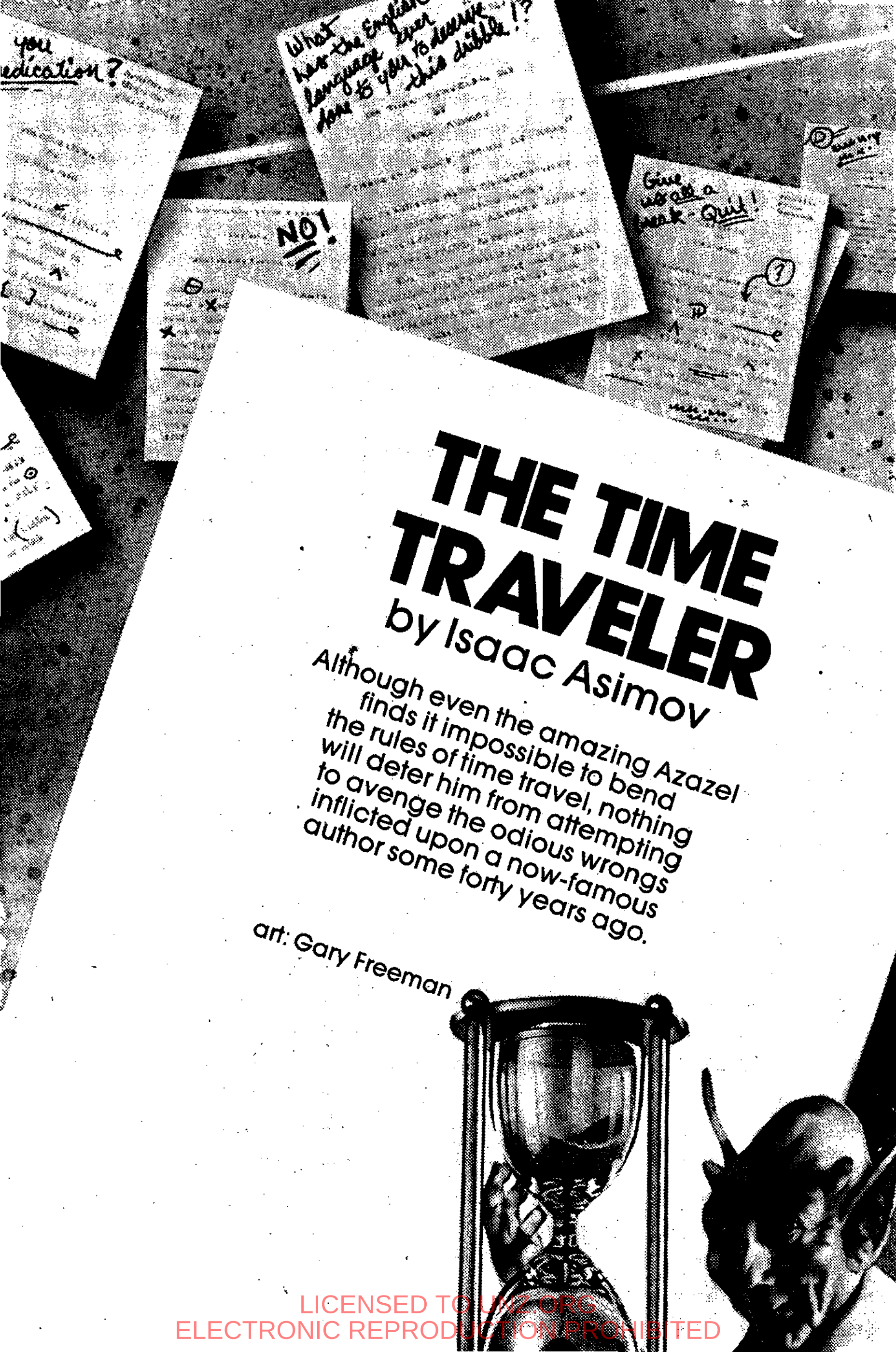
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What has the English language ever done to you to deserve this dribble!?
NO!
Give us all a break. Quit!

THE TIME TRAVELER

by Isaac Asimov

Although even the amazing Azazel finds it impossible to bend the rules of time travel, nothing will deter him from attempting to avenge the odious wrongs inflicted upon a now-famous author some forty years ago.

art: Gary Freeman

"Actually, I know someone much like you," said George to me as we sat in the lobby of the Café des Modistes, after having consumed a more or less gracious repast.

I was rather enjoying the opportunity to do nothing, in defiance of the deadlines that awaited me at home, and I should have let it go, but I couldn't. I have a profound appreciation of the uniqueness of my character. "What do you mean?" I said. "There is no one like me."

"Well," admitted George, "he doesn't write as much as you do. No one does. But that's only because he has *some* regard for the quality of what he writes and is not of the opinion that his lightest typographical error is deathless prose. Still, he *does* write, or rather *did* write, for some years ago, he died and passed on to that special spot in purgatory reserved for writers, in which inspiration strikes continually, but there are no typewriters and no paper."

"I yield to you in your knowledge of purgatory, George," I said, stiffly, "since you embody it in your person, but why does this writer-acquaintance of yours remind you of me, aside from simply being a writer?"

"The reason the resemblance burst in upon my inward eye, old friend, is that, while having achieved worldly success and wealth, as you have, he also complained continually and bitterly of being underappreciated."

I frowned. "I do *not* complain of being underappreciated."

"Do you not? I have just spent a tedious lunch listening to you complain at not receiving your full and just deserts, by which, I suspect, you do not mean horse-whipping."

"George, you know very well that I was merely complaining about some of the reviews I have received lately; reviews written by small-minded envious writers-manqué—"

"I have often wondered: What is a writer-manqué?"

"A failed writer or, in other words, a reviewer."

"There you have it, then. Your comments reminded me of my old friend, now no longer with us, Fortescue Quackenbrane Flubb."

"Fortescue Quackenbrane Flubb?" I said, rather stunned.

"Yes. Old Quackbrain, we used to call him."

"And what did he call you?"

"A variety of names I no longer remember," said George. "We were friends from youth, because we had gone to the same high school. He had been some years ahead of me, but we met at meetings of the alumni association."

"Really, George? Somehow I had never suspected you of a high-school education."

"Yes, indeed, we went to Aaron Burr High School, old Quackbrain and I. Many's the time he and I sang the old alma mater song together, while tears of nostalgia ran down our cheeks. Ah, golden high-school days!"

And, with his voice rising into a non-musical quaver, he sang:

"When the Sun shines on our high school,
With its golden hue;
There, above our loved Old Cesspool,
Waves the black and blue."

"Old Cesspool?" I said.

"A term of affection. Yale is known as 'Old Eli,' and the University of Mississippi is "Ol' Miss" and Aaron Burr High School—"

"Is Old Cesspool."

"Exactly."

"And what is 'black and blue.' "

"Our school colors," said George, "but I am sure you want to hear the story of Fortescue Quackenbrane Flubb."

"There's nothing I want to hear less," I said.

Fortescue Quackenbrane Flubb [said George] was, in middle life, a happy man; or, at least, he should have been a happy man, for he was blessed with all anyone could reasonably want.

He had had a long career as a successful writer, turning out books that sold well and were popular and, despite that, books that were spoken of highly by those writers-manqué who call themselves reviewers.

I can see from your face, old man, that you are about to ask me how it is possible for a man to be successful writer, and to have a name like Fortescue Quackenbrane Flubb—and yet remain completely unknown to you. I might answer that this is evidence of your total self-absorption, but I will not, for there is another explanation. Like all writers of even a minimum of sensibility, old Quackbrain used a pseudonym. Like any writer with a modicum of feeling, he didn't want anyone to know how he made his living. I know that you use your own name, but you have no shame!

Quackbrain's pseudonym, of course, would be well-known to you, but he had made me promise, once, to keep it an inviolate secret even after he had passed on to his typewriterless purgatoriality and I, of course, must honor that promise.

Yet old Quackbrain was not a happy man.

As a fellow-alumnus of dear old Burr, he confided in me. "Of what use is it, George, that money pours in on me in a never-stinting spate? Of what use is it that my fame is world-wide? Of what use is it that I am treated with the utmost consideration by all and sundry."

"Quackbrain," I said solemnly, "I believe that there is good use in all this."

"Bah," he said, "possibly in a worldly sense; possibly in a mere material sense. Yet it leaves the soul untouched."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," and here he struck his chest a resounding thump, "the burning memories of youthful snubs and spurnings remain unavenged and, indeed, forever unavengeable."

I was thunderstruck. "Surely, you did not receive youthful snubs and spurnings?"

"Did I not? At Old Cesspool itself. At Aaron Burr High School."

"But what happened?" I said, scarcely able to credit my ears.

"It was in 1934," he said, "I was a junior then and beginning to feel the divine flow of inspiration within me. I knew that someday I would be a great writer and so I signed up for a special writing class that old man Yussif Newberry was giving. Do you remember Yussif Newberry, George?"

"Do you mean Old Snarley Face Newberry?"

"The very same. It was his notion that by calling together such a class, he would have an untapped well of talent from which he could draw written gems that would fill the school's literary semi-annual magazine. Do you remember the magazine, George?"

I shuddered, and old Quackbrain said, "I see you do. We were assigned to write essays as a preliminary measure of our ability and, as I recall, I wrote a paean to spring, breathlessly eloquent, and poetic besides.

"When Snarley Face called on volunteers to read their products, my hand went up proudly at once, and he called me to the head of the class. I clutched my manuscript in a hand which, I recall, was perspiring with excitement, and I read my effusion in a ringing voice. I anticipated going through all fifteen pages to gathering excitement in the audience and ending it to the swelling sound of cheers and applause. I anticipated wrongly. Within a page and a half I was interrupted by Newberry. 'This,' he said, enunciating clearly, 'is the veriest crap, unfit for anything but fertilizer, and only dubiously so even for that.'

"Upon this, the class of young sycophants broke into uproarious laughter and I was forced to sit down without completing my reading. Nor was that all. Newberry seized every chance thereafter to humiliate me. Nothing that I wrote pleased him, and he made his displeasure disgustingly public, and always to the delight of the class that, in this way, made me its butt.

"At last, as the final task assigned us that term, we were each required to write a story, or a poem or an essay designed to be submitted for publication in the literary semi-annual. I wrote a light-hearted essay filled with sparkling wit and humor, and imagine my pleased surprise when Newberry accepted it.

"Naturally, I felt it only just and wise to seek out old Snarley Face after class and congratulate him on his acumen. "I am glad, sir," I said, "that you will have achieved a better product than usual through the use of my essay in the literary semi-annual."

And he said to me, baring his yellow fangs in a most unpleasant manner, "I took it, F. Q. Flubb, only because it was the only submission that made any attempt whatever, however unsuccessfully, to be funny. Its enforced acceptance, Flubb, is the last straw and I will not give this class again."

"Nor did he, and, though forty years have passed, the memory of my treatment in that class at Old Cesspool remains green. The scars remain fresh, George, and I can never erase them."

I said, "But Quackbrain, think of how that old beloved son of an unidentified father must have felt as you rose to literary fame. Indeed, the manner in which you soared to nearly the top of the literary world must have embittered him far more than his old snubs and spurnings could possibly have embittered you."

"What do you mean, 'to *nearly* the top'—but never mind. You have clearly not kept up with the later history of the school. The miserable miscreant who gave that class died about five years after I attended it, doing so, it is clear, in an obvious effort to avoid witnessing the triumph of the downtrodden, since the lightnings of fame did not begin to flicker about my brow until three years after his death, and so here I am, forever in frustration over the fact that I cannot snap my fingers scornfully under the snub nose of the master snubber. But what would you? Even the gods cannot change the past."

"I wonder," I said softly.

"Eh?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

But, of course, I was thinking of Azazel, my two-centimeter friend from another World, or possibly Universe, or possibly Continuum, whose technological expertise is so far beyond our own as to seem a kind of magic. [Oh, did someone named Clarke say something like that. Well, since I never heard of him, he can be of no importance whatever.]

Azazel was asleep when my calling routine fetched him from his own World, or possibly Universe, or possibly Continuum, and, of course, I won't give you details of the routine. A coarse mind such as yours would be irretrievably damaged if it tried to encompass the subtleties of the endorcism. I'm only thinking of you, old friend.

I waited patiently for Azazel to wake up, for he is inclined to be a bit testy if aroused, and a testy Azazel is a dangerous Azazel for all his tiny size. So there was nothing to do but to watch his arms and legs move through complicated evolutions I could make nothing of. Presumably, he was dreaming something and reacting to the dream.

As the motions became violent, his eyes opened and he sat up with what seemed a start. "I thought so," he moaned (a high-pitched sibilant moan like a tiny steam-whistle), "It was only a dream."

"What was, O Wonder of the Universe?"

"My assignation with the fair Zibbulk. Will it never become reality? Of course," he added sadly, "she is something of your size and so she refuses to take me seriously."

"Can't you make yourself larger, O Miracle of the Ages?"

"Of course," he said, with a tiny snarl, "but then my substance becomes thin, smoky and wraith-like and, when I try to embrace her, she feels nothing. I don't know why it is, but fair females like to feel *something* under such conditions. Still, enough of the poetic outpourings of my personal tragedy. What do you want this time, you miserable piece of trumpery?"

"Time travel, O Astounder of Astrality."

"Time travel," shrieked Azazel. "That is impossible."

"Is it? I am no physicist, Great One, but scientists on this world speak of faster-than-light travel and of worm-holes."

"They may, for all I care, speak of molasses and of hummingbirds, but time travel is theoretically impossible. Forget it."

"Very well," I sighed, "but that means that old Quackbrain will spend his last few remaining years unable to avenge the snubs and spurnings he has received from villains in the past, villains who did not perceive, let alone appreciate, his great talents."

At this Azazel's face turned from its normal beet-red color to something more approaching the delicate pink of a watermelon's interior. "Snubs and spurnings?" he said. "Ah, how well I know the spurns that patient merit of th'unworthy takes. You have a friend, then, who suffers as I have suffered."

"No one," I said cautiously, "can suffer as your mighty spirit has suffered, O Solace of the Impoverished, but he has suffered somewhat and still suffers."

"How sad. And he wishes to go back in time in order to avenge his patient merit on th'unworthy."

"Exactly, but you said time travel is impossible."

"And so it is. However, I can adjust minds. If you have, or can get something that has been in much contact with him, I can so arrange the workings of his mind that it will *seem* to him that he has gone into the past and met face to face with his ancient tormenters, and he can then do as he wishes."

"Excellent," I said. "As it happens, I have here a ten-dollar bill which

I borrowed out of his wallet on the occasion of our last meeting and I am quite sure that it has been in intimate contact with him for at least a month, for old Quackbrain is anything but a Quickbuck."

And so it was, for I met Quackbrain about a month later, and he pulled me to one side.

"George," he said, "last night I had the most amazing dream. At least, I *think* it was a dream, for if it were anything else, I would be going mad. It seemed so *real* it was as though I had stepped back in time. Forty years back."

"Back in time, eh?"

"That's what it seemed like, George. It was as though I were a time traveler."

"Tell me about it, Quackbrain."

"I dreamed I was back at Old Cesspool. I mean *old* Old Cesspool. Not the way it is today, broken down and lost in the inner city, but as it was forty years ago when it was a respectable antique building, aged only by age. I could walk through the corridors and see the classes, the high schoolers at work. There was the faint aura of Depression. Do you remember the Great Depression, George?"

"Of course I do."

"I read the notices on the bulletin board. I looked over the latest edition of the school paper. No one stopped me. No one noticed me. It was as though I didn't exist to them, and I realized that I was my present-day self wandering in an earlier time. And suddenly I further realized that somewhere in the building was Yussif Newberry, still alive. I realized at that moment that I had been brought to Old Cesspool for a purpose. I had a briefcase in my hands and I searched its contents and a great gladness came over me for I had with me all the proofs I needed.

"I pounded up the stairs to the third floor, where his office was to be found. Do you remember his office, George, and the musty smell of stale books that existed within it? That smell was still there after forty years, or, rather, I had gone back forty years and found it where it had always been. I was afraid that Old Snarly Face might be in class, but my dream brought me back at the right time. He was having a free hour and was engaged in marking papers.

"He looked up as I entered. *He* saw me. *He* took notice of me. He was meant to.

"He said, 'Who are you?'

"I said, 'Prepare for astonishment, Yussif Newberry, for I am none other than Fortescue Quackenbrane Flubb.'

"He frowned. 'You mean you are the aged father of that grubby nincompoop I had in my class last year?'

" 'No I am *not* the aged father of that grubby nincompoop. Beware, Newberry, for I am that grubby nincompoop himself. I come from forty years in the future to confront you, you cowardly torturer of my youthful self.'

" 'From forty years in the future, eh? I must admit that the passage of time has not improved you. I would have placed the chance of your looking worse than you look now as trifling, but I see you have managed.'

" 'Newberry,' I thundered, 'Prepare to suffer. Do you know what I have become in forty years?'

" 'Yes,' he said calmly, 'you have become a remarkably ugly man in late middle age. I suppose it was unavoidable but I can almost bring myself to be sorry for you.'

" 'I have become more than that, Yussif Newberry. I have become one of the great literary figures of the United States. I have here, for your selection, a copy of my entry in *Who's Who in America*. Note the number of my published books and note further, Newberry, that nowhere in these august volumes is the despised name of Yussif Newberry mentioned. I have here, in addition, Yussif Newberry, a sampling of reviews of my latest works. Read them and note particularly what it says of my talent and my sterling writing ability. I have here, even more, a profile in the *New Yorker* magazine that makes much of me. And now, Yussif Newberry, think of all the callous and wicked things you said of me and of my writing last year in class, and hang your head in bitter shame, Yussif Newberry!'

" 'I suppose,' said Newberry, 'this is a dream.'

" 'It is probably a dream,' I said, 'but if so, it is my dream, and what I have here to show you is the truth as it shall be forty years from now. Is not your head bowed in deep contrition, Yussif Newberry?'

" 'No,' said Newberry, 'I am not responsible for the future. All I can say is that last year in my class everything you wrote was crap and it will stay crap not only forty years from now but to the last syllable of recorded time. Now get out of here and let me mark my papers.'

"And with that, the dream ended. What do you think of it, George?"

"It must have been realistic."

"Indeed. Indeed. But that's not what I mean. Can you imagine that teacher-insult to the human condition, upon learning of my greatness, still clinging to his position. No shame. No despair. He still maintained that my juvenilia was crap and moved not one centimeter from that position. My heart, George, is broken. It was a far, far worse thing I did than I have ever done. It is a far, far worse rest that I go to than I have ever known."

He drifted away, old man, a shattered and broken hulk. It was not long afterward that he died.

George ended his story and wiped his eyes with the five dollar bill I had given him for the purpose. It was not as absorbent as a handkerchief would have been, but he insists that he finds the tactile sensation of the bill to be superior.

I said, "I suppose it is useless to ask, George, that your stories make sense, but I find I must point out that this was not a true travel in time, according to your own account, but only an imaginary one. It was, indeed, a vision induced by Azazel's manipulation of Flubb's brain. In that case, Flubb was in control of it, or should have been. Why did he not have Yussif Newberry crawling at his feet in a hopeless plea for forgiveness?"

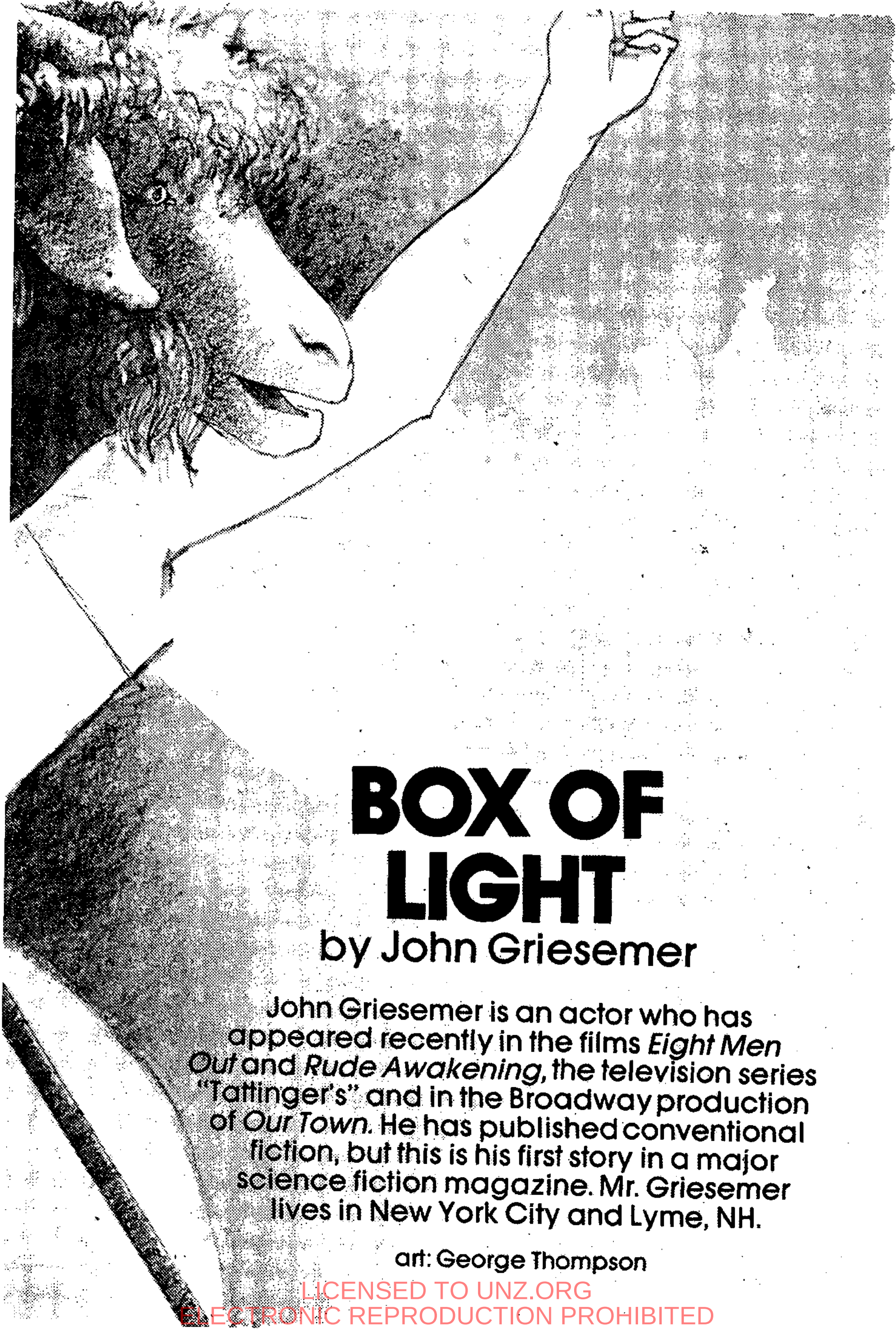
"That," said George, "is precisely what I asked Azazel on another occasion. Azazel said that poor Quackbrain, whatever his prejudice in his own favor, was enough of a literary craftsman to know, at least in his unconscious, that some of his writing *was* crap and that Newberry was correct. Being honest, he had to face that."

George thought a moment or two and then added, "I suppose he's not much like you after all." ●

ON GRAVITY AND PERPETUAL MOTION

Even if the earth were cored
like an apple, pole to pole,
and I stepped over the edge
to be drawn immediately down
accelerating at thirty-two feet
per second squared till I passed
the molten core and rose,
decelerating at an equivalent rate
as I intersected the uneasy strata
absorbing the geology of creation
until I surfaced at the farther pole
pausing for one balanced moment
before I fell again impelled by
gravity's unassuming pull, I would
rise and fall perpetually, and yet
though every atom of my body knew
its intimate grasp, I would understand
of the force that moved me, like love,
no more than its name.

—David Lunde



BOX OF LIGHT

by John Griesemer

John Griesemer is an actor who has appeared recently in the films *Eight Men Out* and *Rude Awakening,* the television series "Tattinger's" and in the Broadway production of *Our Town.* He has published conventional fiction, but this is his first story in a major science fiction magazine. Mr. Griesemer lives in New York City and Lyme, NH.

art: George Thompson

He left on the midnight flight and got here just before dawn. It's only a two hour plane trip from New York to Boca, so Alex must have had a hell of a time getting a cab or else he was up to something he hasn't told me about yet.

He comes into my room with a beer. I'm like sitting on the edge of my bed, rubbing my scalp. The goop the makeup guy puts on my hair really itches and I didn't take a shower when I got back from the shoot last night, I was so tired. Fell asleep in my dress.

Alex positions himself in the corner of the room where a window meets a blank wall. Very strategic. The blinds are down and the sunrise is coming through in lines. The color of the light is bright orange. A half dozen strips glow on his pale blue pants. I rub my eyes.

Alex wants to know how the shooting went after I called him yesterday. I tell him so-so. He wants to know if I'm glad to see him. I say yes.

Girl, you don't look it, he says softly.

I will, I tell him, when I wake up.

I can't bring myself to stand yet. My ankles still hurt from the high heels I have to wear for the scenes we're doing this week.

Why're you standing over there? I ask him. You haven't even touched me yet.

He comes across the room silently, glides really, and it occurs to me that I didn't let him into the house and I want to ask him how he got in here. But he has his cheek against mine and his free hand on the inside of my thigh. It feels good and I tell him that. It feels good to see him.

Then he touches me with the cold beer can. The chill on my thigh makes me jump. He presses it in harder and kind of rolls it right up my leg. The rest of him is bearing down on me, too. I'm falling back onto the bed. I don't want the meanness to come out so soon, and though what we're doing isn't really nasty, that hard metal chill down there reminds me of things. Alex rears back and throws the can away. As he does, a ribbon of foam hovers in the air over our heads, and that is the last thing I see that isn't him.

On the set later, I can tell Keith, the director, is none too pleased Alex, my manager, has flown in.

The cavalry has arrived, he mutters. I don't grace him with a response. Alex is over talking to a couple of the gaffers about the dog tracks or something and doesn't hear him. I was thirty minutes late and Keith was primed to throw a fit, but when he saw Alex with me, he held it in. He wants to scope things out before he starts pulling any stunts.

I had called Alex the second day of shooting. I told him I wanted off the picture. I told him I was willing to bet I'd be canned by the end of the week and I ought to do it myself sooner than later.

Keith was being abusive. Besides the usual "honey" and "sweetheart" business, he shows up the first night I'm down here to talk about the project, so he said. The dope he had, I could go along with. But he wants in bed with me right off the bat. You expect some of that stuff. You go along with it when you have to. But not in every case.

I begged off, using the jet lag routine. Fine, he said, fine. And drove his car right across the lawn of this house the company has set me up with. Nearly scraped his fender on some kind of palm tree out by the corner.

The next day, the first day of shooting, Keith is all over my case about my work. The "honeys" and "sweethearts" drip poison. He lets it be known that I am going to be the film's big obstacle. If the picture makes it, it'll be because he triumphed over my failings.

Alex said on the phone that it was early. I shouldn't get too crazy. Besides, once they get some stuff in the can, they can't fire me. If anybody gets fired on a film, he said, it's the director. So don't sweat it.

But I did. Constantly. The rest of the cast, all old friends of Keith's, had bought into his program completely. They gave me the cold shoulder. I was getting dumped on by day and strung out by night.

The set dresser and the makeup man are local and are hooked into all the connections, so you can see why in a matter of days I was a jittery mess. I called Alex and fell apart on the phone. I'll take the midnight flight down, he said. And there he was, in my bedroom.

After I'm in makeup and costume, Alex comes over to where I'm sitting outside the wardrobe trailer and he gives me a sip of his coffee. It's laced with whiskey, but not much. I feel so much better now that he's here. It's like I've separated into layers. There's the jittery top layer that's all wrapped up in the picture and my acting. That layer is relaxing some because Alex is here on the set. There's the next layer, the soft one, the one that opened up completely when Alex was in my bedroom. And then finally there's something lower that I don't think I want to get into. But I know it's about where Alex was before he came to my house this morning and how he got inside without knocking and it's about the feel of that metal can he pressed into me when we first touched.

It looks pretty easy for you today, babe, he says quietly. All establishing shots and backgrounds. The DP figures you'll be done by noon.

I take another belt from his cup. I tell him we can go to the beach. You could use a little sun, I say.

The door to the wardrobe trailer opens and Keith comes out. He is in Florida retirement drag: flowered shirt, tangerine golf pants, white shoes, white belt. He says he's going to be in this scene with me, a pedestrian. He's going to do an Alfred Hitchcock, a cameo in his own film.

Keith asks Alex if he'd like to get in on the act, be in the street scene.

Alex says no. He's here to watch. Keith pulls out a pair of sunglasses and gives them to me.

Here, sweetheart, he says. Wear these in the scene. We'll rehearse for camera in five.

I can't be sure he's serious about the sunglasses. They're pink and blue rhinestone numbers. I'd look like an ass.

Keith goes into some serious pathology over the sunglasses. He screams, then he and Alex almost come to blows and now Keith is on the line to the producers in Atlanta or L.A., one of the two, I don't know which, I'm so upset.

I only said I didn't want to wear the sunglasses in the scene. I said they weren't in character. Keith exploded. He said what did I know about *character?* Who did I think I was telling him how to do *his* picture? The one he wrote, the one he half financed and now is directing, Little Miss *Character,* Little Miss *Method Actor?* If I wasn't so strung out every morning, he yelled, maybe I'd know something about character, about my *job.*

I was too flipped to say something back about my first night down here when who the hell was at my bungalow with a Nikon case stuffed with little red toolies and a baggie full of Guyanan spliffs? And anyway, Alex is yelling at him by this time and the entire crew is getting edgy and primed to pull them apart if they start hitting.

Instead, Alex grabs my arm, says work is over for the day and we'll be at the beach if anybody wants us. Keith screams work just might be over for good and we can go to hell instead of the beach and he'll be on the phone with the bigs, if anybody wants *him.*

We get to the beach and the tide's in and it's noon. The sun beats down and the waves flop way up on the white sand. The ocean looks bloated. I'm done with crying and lie with my head on Alex's brown belly. I look up toward his neck and chin. I can see his bone necklace lying in his chest hair. It looks like white claws working toward me through some kind of underbrush.

It puts me in mind of when I was a little girl. There was a swamp on the edge of the commune's land where I grew up. This is right near the Canadian border. Upper New York State. The men had dumped the body of a dead horse there and poured quicklime on it. I was the only child who knew about it, and every month or so I would crawl through the cedars to see the pale bones and shreds of hair sinking into the earth. It was like a shrine to me. A shrine to I don't know what.

Anyway, lying with Alex and looking at his necklace, I think of this and swear I can smell the rot and the evergreens all around me.

But it's the heat. I'm giddy from it. Weirded out, too. I tell myself I am in Florida. With Alex. And he will protect me.

Won't you? I ask him.

Done, babe, he says. Done and done.

You're not worried about him calling the bigs?

Nope.

He owns half the picture, Alex. That means a lot.

Not true, Alex says, and he lifts his head up to check my reaction. Because, babe, I own the other half.

We're driving away from the coast, away from Boca. This whole day is getting beyond me. I want something to calm me down and I tell that to Alex and he says he'll do even better than calm me. He says he'll get me revenge.

So, we're going inland, past the pricey malls and on into where the railyards give way to the sawgrass and the roads are really lanes of white crushed shells.

I flipped out at the beach when I pieced it together about the film. Alex owns half the picture, so he buys me a role? Is that it? Who's in on this deal, I want to know.

What's the diff? he now asks, driving the convertible down a straight, white strip of road. You got the role of your career and I'm going to clean you up and ruin Keith's week.

Clean me up?

You're gonna be a drug-free starlet, honey babe. In a couple of months your urinalysis results will be suitable for framing in the lobby of the DEA.

What a crock, I say. I don't *want* to quit. My work'll suffer.

And Keith wouldn't want me to do what I'm gonna do to him either. But neither of you got a choice.

What are you talking about?

Powerful magic, babe. Mumbo-jumbo. The cure for all ills.

I know how Alex digs powerful magic. It goes with the magic of power, he likes to say. It goes with being in the film business.

I met Alex and his power two years ago at—get this—Hoover Dam. Truly. A side trip both of us had taken. The kind of thing gamblers and everybody else out in Vegas does to back off from the bright lights and Lady Luck for a little bit. At one time or another, everyone looks up from the slots or the blackjack tables and turns to the honey or the hunk next to them and whispers, Hey, babe, let's beat it for a while. Let's do the desert.

Sometimes the line works, and off you go together. Sometimes you got to go alone. Either way, when you finally stumble out of the churning noise of the casino, you're always surprised that it's dawn or night or mid-afternoon. In Vegas the hour of the day when you step outside is never what you think it will be.

Alex was out at the dam on his own in a rented Bimmer. An ice blue 321i. He told me later he'd just dropped five grand and needed a little air. I was there alone to nurse a hangover. I had borrowed our stage manager's car. I was doing an industrial at the Sands. A fashion show and sales convention for some Eurotrash sportswear manufacturer. I needed to get away from all those Common Market types.

Out at the dam there were a couple of tourist cars, a caravan of three Airstreams, and us. I was over checking out the sculptures by the administration building, the ones that look like they're from some old science fiction movie. Over strolls this tall, brown man in linen and silk. I could tell there was plenty of muscle under all that fine fabric. Alex.

He struck up a conversation. We left in his car, headed back, looped around the city and drove a hundred miles or so farther west, toward the atomic test site. He said he wanted to feel the earth move under his feet. He'd heard they were going to do an underground blast that day. There'd be shock waves. I was all for that, I said.

I called in sick from Lathrop Wells, told the stage manager where his car was, and got myself fired.

It didn't matter, though, because out in the desert Alex let it be known he was a purveyor of properties.

Hot properties? I kidded him.

Some like it, he said.

And when he looked down at me I could see myself and the chain link fence of the testing range reflected in his shades.

He said he was, among other things, an agent for performing artists and was I interested? Well, the rest is history. We stood out there for another hour and, sure enough, we felt a tingle ripple through the earth's surface. They actually did do a blast, just like Alex said they would.

Somewhere over those hills, he said, and he nodded over the fence toward a bone-grey ridge in the distance, a mountain probably just collapsed. A whole lot of sand a mile or so down was just turned into radioactive glass.

You interested in science and stuff? I asked him.

But he just goes: The first A-bomb ever, some of the big brains thought the whole atmosphere might go up when they set the thing off.

And they went ahead and did it anyway, hunh?

They were drawn to the power, he said.

He stared down so hard at me, I had to look away. The earth and all under my sandals was still. The tickle that came from the explosion had long gone. A little breeze blew some grit over my black polished toenails. Alex pulled me to him.

Later, we drove the BMW back to Vegas, booked a flight east and I became Alex's client and then some.

We are in the back of a Quonset hut in the boonies somewhere west of Boca and I'm about to throw up because this guy who Alex calls Mister Businessman has just sacrificed a goat, for Godsake, on my behalf. I tell Alex I want out of here, but he grabs my arm and says, No.

We have been here two, three, maybe five or six hours. Maybe it's midnight outside. I don't know. Old army blankets are over the windows. Crates of things are stacked around all the way up to the curved metal roof that clicks in the heat. There's stenciled letters on all the wooden crates. Russian writing or Polish or something. There's bales of stuff wrapped in garbage bag plastic. Coming in, I'd noticed the tail of an airplane out back. My guess is lots of shipping and receiving goes on here. After dark.

Mister Businessman is huge. Maybe six-six. Wide. A shaved head, but with this sweet, dark face. He speaks Haitian to himself, but to us he talks in English with this thick accent. He's got on jungle fatigue pants and a Disney World T-shirt cut in slices across his chest, so the Mickey Mouse on the front looks like he's just taken a slide down a cheese grater. Mister Businessman's black skin shows through the slits. He is sweating. Goat's blood is all over his forearms.

He killed the animal behind the hut and comes back in with a bucket of the animal's insides in one hand, plus one of the goat's horns in his other hand. The whole time he's gone he leaves his cassette player on with a tape of echoey chant music that sounds like some bad homemade bootleg. Over and over the chant goes. Alex sits cross-legged next to me and chants along with it. He's been into this whole thing from the start and has been mysterious and stern as hell with me. You *must* go along with this, he whispered when we first got here. Mister Businessman, he says to me, is an old, old associate of mine.

I get a terrible thirst and finally give in and drink some of this tea Mister Businessman offered at the beginning of the ceremony or whatever. It's bitter as hell, but it helps actually, and with my mind off being thirsty, I can look at some of the specific junk piled up on a box in front of us. Metal parts. Machinery. Bird's nests of audio tape. Animal things, too. Feathers. Bones. And now, goat pieces.

When Mister Businessman comes back in, he puts the bucket of goat material on a small propane camp stove and starts to cook the stuff, in the blood and all. I feel a faint coming on.

Uh-oh, I'm thinking, and I'm reeling from the smells when I feel something stroking me. Down my arms, my legs, back to my arms, my neck.

I open my eyes and I see Mister Businessman is touching me all over with the goat's horn. It's like he's writing on me. He makes gentle little squiggles up and down my arms and legs.

I'm watching this knowing that the heat and the scratchy, echoey tape music and the smell and maybe the tea they gave me is making me weird which is why I stay almost totally calm when I see the goat's horn ripple and shift around and start to turn into something alive going out from Mister Businessman's fist. It's a snake. It seems natural. Like this is what ought to be happening. The snake is twisting slowly and it's got a dull brown color but with two tiny, bright green eyes. The tongue goes in and out the way snake tongues do and the turned-up corners of its mouth make it look like it's got a little smile on.

Alex takes the snake from Mister Businessman and lets it stretch out from his hand toward my . . . , toward me, down there. And I feel the snake touch ever so gently between my legs and I smile at Alex and he nods and smiles, too, and I can tell Mister Businessman is standing up and he takes from the pile of junk a car aerial that was lying around and he dips it into the mixture on the stove and touches the tip to my mouth and I taste something salty and feel the little ball of heat on my lips, like a pearl resting there, and he draws all over the features of my face—my cheekbones, my eyes, my nose—and I feel a moving circle, as if something is pulsing down below between my legs—but I can't see anything now—like the snake has coiled up there to sleep or if it really is just a goat's horn, then Alex is drawing little circles with it down there and both men are saying, chanting, with the tape, Sleep, sleep . . . sleep. And I do.

Here's how well the magic works: by the next morning, Keith is hospitalized. His appendix burst.

I wake up alone in my bungalow feeling fresh as a daisy and hear the news from the van driver who comes to take me to the set. He says there will be a meeting.

Alex has called the whole crew together in the big striped tent where we all take our meals on the edge of the golf course. He says he is taking over the picture. He explains that he is now the controlling interest in the project and that he's had experience because he's taken over pictures before. (Funny, he's never mentioned that to me.) Then he says we'll start the day's shooting over by the canal, the scene where the extraterrestrials make the water around the yacht foam up and turn to blood.

The F/X guys are all rigged, Alex says, so let's go.

I'm thinking how I'll have to do considerable screaming today, plus a bunch of lines. Good thing I learned them already. I'm doing some vocal warm-ups when Alex walks past me and says sorry he never came home last night. He had business to take care of, being the new director and all, but how did I sleep?

Fine, I say.

He smiles and pats my cheek. Did you have your usual jump start this morning? he asks, referring to the little pharmacy he knows I'm prone to take with my morning o.j.

I shake my head no. And I'm surprised: I'd never even thought of the pills this morning. I don't say anything, and he just smiles some more as if to say, Perfect, and off he goes.

I'm sitting in the makeup trailer thinking about all this when Bandito, the hair guy, lights up and asks if I want a toke and I say, No, I'm just not feeling like it.

He shrugs, makes a joke about not letting the joint get too close to the mousse he's using or we'll have another Bhopal and I'm saying I'll be glad when this location is done and my character goes back to the 1960s and I can wear nothing at all in my hair because this crap makes my scalp itch and—!

I'm stopped cold by what I see out the window. I'm only barely aware Bandito is waiting for me to finish what I was saying. What I see almost pulls me out of my seat.

Over by the electrics truck Mister Businessman is smiling his huge baby-face smile and looking right at the trailer I'm in. I can see him breathing—maybe he's chuckling to himself—because the slits on his T-shirt open and close like the gills on a fish. He's holding a rope that gives him a couple of tugs and I see right next to him he's got a goat and the goat's only got one horn.

Oh, Jeez, I manage to kind of gasp and Bandito goes, Hunh?

I point and he leans in front of me, over the makeup table, to see out the window. What? he asks.

That *guy,* I say, but all I can see now is the back of Bandito's flowered shirt.

No guy there, Bandito says.

Of course, I think. Instantly I know I won't see anything when I look again. And I don't.

So I don't say anything, especially not anything about a goat with one horn.

To Bandito, who's by now stoned, it's nothing and he goes back to work on my hair, teasing it.

The day's shooting goes without a hitch. First, the special effects and then my escape scene. Me, alone on the yacht. Me, getting away from my kidnappers. Me, alone making the video tape to leave behind to explain why I am not a crazy person but really just an unwilling time traveler.

Everyone says I'm doing great. I get giddy. I feel like I imagine I'm supposed to feel with my first big role in a feature film. I feel like a damn fine actress.

I tell Alex that I can't wait to see the dailies of the stuff we did today and he says, No. There's going to be a new policy now that he's the director. Dailies are closed. He'll see me at home, he says.

Okay. It's like this:

The goat is standing on my chest, forefeet on each breast. He lowers his head. I smell something like—what?—like death, quicklime, the cedar boughs. The goat's head lowers more, keeps coming closer, his mouth open. His breath. One horn. I can see it.

A scream stops everything.

Alex has rolled off of me. We are in my bungalow. It is the middle of the night. He holds me. I'm curled up in the middle of the bed, sweating, trembling. He's asking, What's wrong, babe? What's wrong?

But no way can I tell him what our lovemaking turned into. No way.

Daylight. I am up now. Soon the van will be here to take us to the set. Alex is in the shower. I feel better even though I stayed awake the whole night after I had that vision or flash or whatever it was. I didn't want it to come back. I'm beginning to wonder if it has anything to do with my pills and whatall.

I'm standing at the bedroom window, naked. There's a hedge all around the backyard, so I know I can't be seen. I'm holding my pills in my fist, but I can't get up the will to pop them in my mouth. It's like my arm is weighed down. The glass louvers are open and a sweet smell blows in. Hyacinth. There's dew all over the lawn and the sun is just starting to make it sparkle when I notice the tracks.

They cross the wet grass and go up the cement walk, so it's easy to see what they are. The huge feet of a man, the cloven hooves of a goat. They go right up to the window and stop. They don't lead anywhere.

I drop all the pills and stare at the tracks for I don't know how long and then I run into the bathroom to drag Alex out to see. But as I pull him down the hall and into the bedroom it hits me what's going to happen. And sure enough it does.

What tracks? he says.

Well, the sun dried them, I guess.

What did they look like?

I shrug. Some animal, I say, then I go, Jeez, is that the van?

And it is, tooting for us out front of the house. We book out of there. I don't talk any more about what I saw.

All morning I do my scene where I tell the government guys what happened to me on the yacht. The scene where I lie to them so I won't blow the aliens' cover, but where I finally break down and tell.

I can't believe it. After my long speech, there's applause. From the day players. From the extras. Even from the crew. Alex glows behind the camera after the take.

We break for lunch, but I can't shake the scene. They give me my throw-away hospital gown to wear while I eat so I don't spill anything on my costume, but I can't bear the thought of food. I just walk away and pace around over near the equipment trucks. I tear the hem of the paper smock into tatters. I'm rattled, but I don't know why. It's the feeling I had during the scene. I can't shake it. Plus lack of sleep. And plus, too, I keep thinking about the tracks I saw. I go over to the lunch tent to find Alex and it's there I get the news.

Keith's dead. Word from the hospital just reached the set.

Alex won't talk. All he says is, The hospital reported Keith contracted an infection from the operation.

What can I say? Alex asks me. The cure killed him.

He turns to go over to where they're setting up a crane shot.

I run after him and tell him I've had it with the whole thing. I went along with him, I say, because I didn't know any better and because Keith upset the hell out of me, but now I do know something and Keith's dead and it's got to stop.

He turns around. He lowers his eyes for a moment, then looks into my face and I can feel the blood throb in my cheeks. For a second there, it's like we're back out in the desert the day we met. There is a power running under or around us that we can't stop. I can tell Alex knows this. And his look tells me to wise up.

He turns and goes.

The hell with that, I think. I stay for the one shot I'm in that afternoon, the overhead crane shot, then I head right over to the production office and pull a set of van keys off the board when the PAs aren't looking. It's dusk by the time I'm reasonably certain I'm on the road to Mister Businessman's.

There is no airplane out back when I find the place. I come down the road and everything looks deserted. The light is all purple and rust colored in the thick leaves. I pull up and get out. Everything's quiet.

When I first open the Quonset hut door, it looks empty inside. It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust, but I can tell that every crate, every box, every bale is gone. The feeling that the place was stuffed to the roof is missing and the room seems huge. Blankets still cover the windows and although it's dim as hell in there and I can't see much, I can hear a rustling sound, like murmurs, coming from all over the room.

Then there's a little squawk from a baby and I hear a woman's voice in the distance hum something. I make out a word or two. French. My eyes finally take it in.

The place is filled with people. All of them are lying or sitting on the dirt floor. Everyone dark skinned, many just wearing rags practically. Women, children, men. The closest ones see the door open, and they stare at me.

In the center of the room I see a blue flame. Mister Businessman is there, stirring a big pot of something on the camp stove. He gives the spoon to a woman who's sitting on the floor near him and he makes his way through the clusters of people. Eyes go from him to me, back and forth.

We step outside. It's going on night. Bugs are chirping. Mister Businessman closes the door quietly behind him. He turns and waits. Silent. This catches me off guard. I'd figured he'd say something like hello. Or, What the hell are you doing here? *Some*thing.

But he just stands there, arms folded over the Mickey Mouse on his chest. His shaved head takes on an orange color in the dusky light.

Finally I work up to saying something and I go, There's a death involved. It comes out of my mouth all creaky and nasal, like I'm whining at him.

Mister Businessman nods, eyes closed.

Did that have to happen? I ask.

Apparently so, he says.

You didn't know? I ask.

This amuses the hell out of him. He laughs. No, he says. You expecting me to know? Me? The *future?*

Well, you know something about something, I say. Have you been around the set? Did you come to my house?

Mister Businessman been right here at the office the whole time, he says. Mister Businessman have plenty work to do since my little deal for Alex. I work overtime, *ma cherie,* on your behalf.

But I saw you. You and . . .

He raises his eyebrows.

. . . You and the goat.

Mister Businessman mulls this over. It's like it's the evening news to him. Not shocking news exactly, but an interesting bit of information.

This could be, he says. This could be what the loas have in mind.

Look, I say, what's going on?

I can hear my voice getting all quivery. I get the feeling like I'm a patient trying to find out from some surgeon what my chances are.

Mister Businessman puts his hands in his pockets and walks over toward the van. He looks at his reflection in the fisheye lens of the rear view mirror. We make a deal, he says. Me and Alex. On your behalf.

I *know* that, I say. I want the deal undone.

Ah, *cherie*, he says and shakes his head no. Too, too much is involved.

A murder? I ask.

Not murder, he says.

Well, what the hell do you call it?

The business, says Mister Businessman. What I was named for.

Well, I want out of the business, I say.

That would disappoint many, many people, he says.

I'm still over near the Quonset hut and I can hear the rustling inside. I get a whiff of the stew cooking on the stove. It actually smells good.

Who are they? I ask and point behind me to the hut.

Perhaps someday your fans, says Mister Businessman and he smiles.

I squint my eyes at him a little and go, They're coming into the country, right? And all those crates and things that were in there have gone out of the country and they're all part of the deal, too. And Alex is part of it. And the movie and me and the ceremony you did.

Mister Businessman nods. Business goes on all the time, he says. All over the world. Then he walks over to me, hand out, palm down. I want to back away, but I am nearly up against the hut. There's nowhere to go. He puts his huge hand on my shoulder. I'm thinking maybe it's time to start screaming but then he speaks my name. And that makes every thought inside me stop.

He tells me to listen to him. I nod okay.

He says there's no going back now. Not for me or him or Alex or even for the people in the hut. We are en route, he says.

Yearning led to a deal, he says, now the deal has gone down.

He tells me I know what the deal is all about.

It's about that thing, he says, and he squeezes me a little. That thing we want to get near, to get *in*. And that way we think we'll possess it. What we deserve. I'm not telling you anything you don't know already. But the loas, he says, they know different. You make your deals with them and that's as close to the thing as you get. They do the rest for you. And they don't let the world go once the world calls to them.

It's dark enough now for my eyes to play tricks on me and it's like Mister Businessman disappears there for a second leaving only a weight where his hand is on my shoulder. So I think I'd better say something to bring him back.

Almost in a whisper I go, You're telling me that's it? I'm stuck?

I can see him again and he nods. Stuck, he says. Stuck with success. That was the deal.

What about Alex?

Stuck too. With wealth.

What about all of them in the hut?

Stuck with America.

What about you?

Oh, I am stuck, he says and I can see his eyes go white as he rolls them back. Stuck with my name.

And he lets his hand fall from my shoulder. His head is tilted toward the sky. There is a plane engine now somewhere in the dark overhead. Mister Businessman tells me to get in the van.

Drive out that way, he says. Then he adds, And no turning back.

With his hand pushing between my shoulder blades, he guides me into the driver's seat. He closes the door and I start up the engine.

I do look back once, though, on my way down the road. The tree branches are thick and I can't see the sky, but I can hear the plane engines almost directly overhead, coming down. Back in the clearing, the hut is a dark shape. Beyond it, Mister Businessman has lit two landing lights for the invisible, roaring plane. The two lights are a deep green. The color I saw once in the eyes of a snake.

I honk down 441 and pull into the motel parking lot around midnight. For the shoot, the company's rented the whole first two floors of the Ramada. I figure I'll leave the keys in the production office which will be open because there's always a couple PAs in there all night running off script revisions or something.

I park the van and I'm crossing the lawn, trying to avoid the sprinklers that are chuck-chucking away in the dark when I hear my own voice coming from the building. It's coming from one of the first floor rooms. It cuts off and I hear some clunks and buzzes, then the sound of the slate boy calling off the scene and the take number. *Clack*, goes the slate, and I hear my voice again. My big scene.

I zig-zag over there. The window is partly slid open and the drapes aren't all the way closed. I sneak up and peek in. I'm looking in on the function room the company uses to screen the dailies. I can see the back of Alex's head. He's in there alone. He's running the projector by remote. If I squeeze close to the glass, I can see the screen.

But it's not me up there.

I mean, it *is*, but at the same time it's not.

I'm staring so hard at the screen I feel like my insides, all my internal organs, have shot up into a space behind my eyes. The rest of me is left all limp and hollow.

I recognize my face, my voice, and everything. And I'm doing all the things I did in the scene, but it's freaky because I've seen myself on film before and this is not me. Something has happened. My skin is purer. My cheekbones look finer. My eyes, they look . . . deeper. It's as if everything about me has gotten enhanced or enriched somehow. And it's not just makeup or lighting because I know about those things. I know what they can do, and they sure as hell can't do this.

My knees get weak under me. I shift some and look at my reflection in the window glass. I can see a dim image made by the motel security lights and what I see looks like the same old me. The same person you see every day.

This must be why Alex didn't want me to watch the dailies. He thinks if the thing with Keith threw me, then my finding out about this, this whatever it is, might send me around the bend.

But why would it? I'm looking at myself on the screen and the thought creeps in . . . isn't this what I really do want? I mean, I *know* what can happen to somebody who looks the way I do on that screen. And suddenly I can see exactly what direction this is all going to take me. It's like a movie of my future is showing on the screen instead of take after take of yesterday's scenes. It's very simple. I will be major within a few years. Very big. And Alex will have handled the whole thing. He will be rich. This has been ordained. We are bound together. En route. I know what Mister Businessman meant. I can see it all right there in my own new image before me.

But Keith is dead. There's that side of it, too, and that's the part I can't be sure of. He didn't deserve what happened to him. At least not that bad. But I deserve what I'm going to get. I believe that. I've worked for it. And so what if I've had a little help. In this business who hasn't?

The projector's run out of film and the screen's gone blank. Alex hasn't moved. The motor still rattles.

The sprinkler is spraying behind me and I hear the droplets rustling in the blades of grass. The noises put me in mind of the rustling sounds all those people made in the hut. Maybe my fans someday, Mister Businessman says. Coming this way. They're part of the deal. And nobody in the hut spoke, just a baby's cry and a woman's hum. Everything else was movement in the dark. Like now. We're stuck says Mister Businessman. The loas are in control. The deal's gone down.

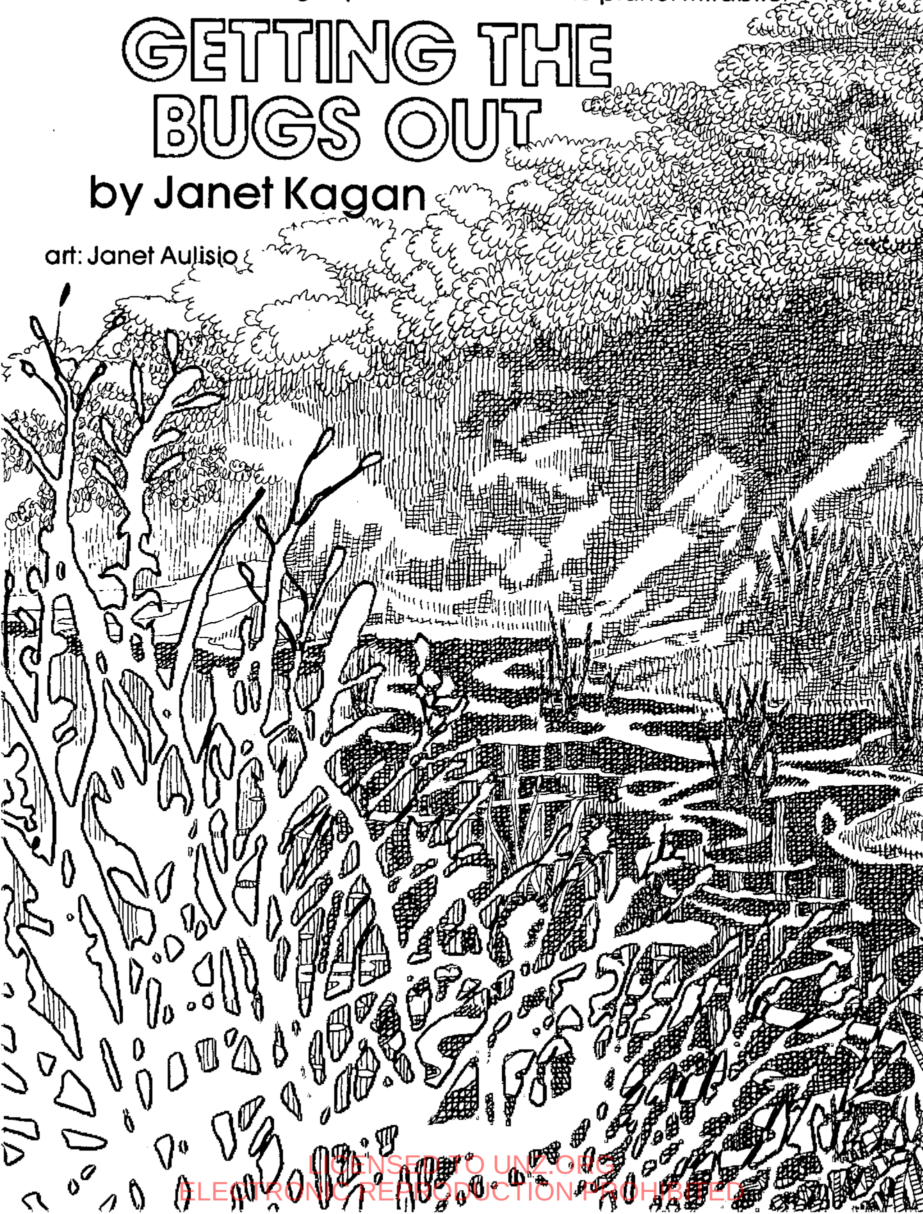
And I notice Alex is still just sitting there looking at the empty screen. He's silhouetted against it, so he's a black shadow from where I stand. And me, I'm outside the window, standing among shadows, staring at the screen, too. And I'm thinking, Here we are. Pouring all our yearning into that flickering box of light. But that's the business, right? And we've got plenty of company. All the time. All over the world. ●

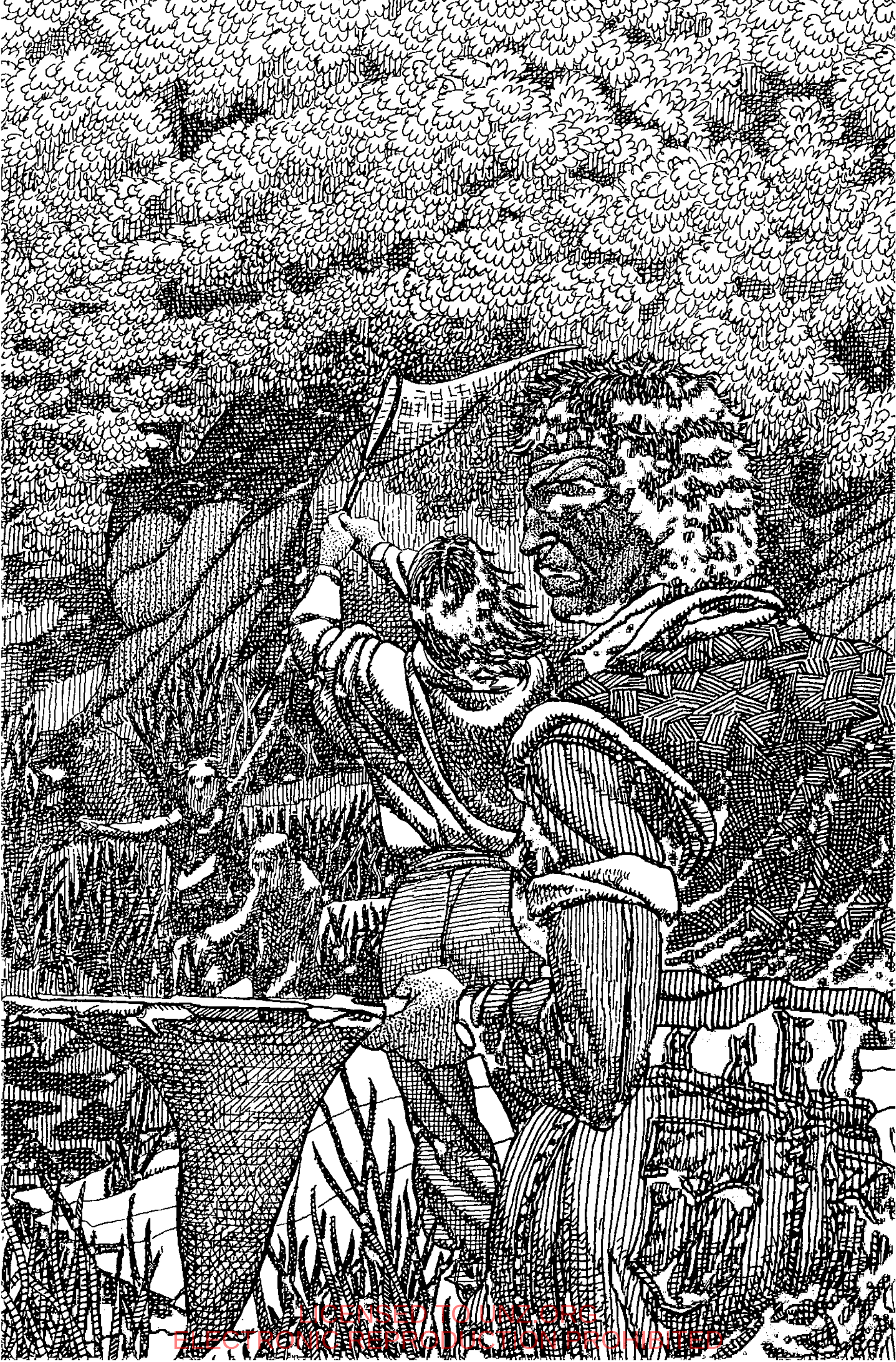
Janet Kagan's first story for *IAsfm*, "The Loch Moose Monster" (March 1989), won our Fourth Annual Readers' Award for Best Novelette. Another of her stories, "The Return of the Kangaroo Rex" (October 1989), took second place in the same category. The author returns to our pages with a new tale about the irrepressible Mama Jason and her host of high-spirited cohorts on the planet Mirabile.

GETTING THE BUGS OUT

by Janet Kagan

art: Janet Aulisio





We were doing a little contemplative fishing out in the middle of Loch Moose. At least, I was. Ilanith had her hook baited but she was having about the same luck I was without bait or hook, which is to say nothing disturbed the serenity of the loch except the odders.

"Mama Jason?" Ilanith said. "I'm sorry I distracted Noisy. That's the biggest bell I've ever seen him make. I couldn't *help* hovering."

"Neither could I." I moved enough to pat her hand. "You weren't distracting Leo, kiddo—*I* was."

She made a scoffing noise loud enough to attract the attention of Pushy, the current head of the pack of odders. He rippled over and lifted his head to bellow at her.

Pushy is part otter, part moose. The improbable mix is courtesy of the folks back on Earth who wanted to make sure we couldn't lose a species we might need once we got to Mirabile. Accordingly, they tucked a bunch of extra genes into everything they sent along. One of the otters gave birth to Pushy and his tribe. Pushy's an inbetweener—not much of an otter (though he has his uses) but terrific for the next step. About half Pushy's kids are full-blown moose, just one gene off Earth authentic.

As for Pushy the odder, he's all grace in the water but that *face* is a howler. Looks like an old boot with big warm eyes.

The boat rocked. This time I *had* to move to compensate as Pushy tried to climb aboard. Ilanith giggled and bought him off with a chunk of stale bread. "Seriously, Mama Jason," she said, as Pushy slithered back into the loch.

"Seriously," I said. "I'm a hot old broad and I can distract Leo from just about anything he's doing. So says Leo—and nice of him to say so, too." I felt the same way about him and if I couldn't think of the right courting present for the man soon I'd start to get cranky on the subject. That was one of the reasons for the vacation (the other being I needed one) and for the contemplative fishing.

I could tell from Ilanith's expression that she didn't believe a word of this. Like most other adults, I took the easy way out. "Wait until you're a little bit older, then you'll understand."

Sensible kid that she is, Ilanith said, "I'll ask Elly."

I thought that over. Elly would find a way to explain it to her—which is why Elly raises kids and I don't. "Do that," I said. "Meanwhile, if you want me to drop you off on shore so you can watch Leo cast the bell, I will. I mean what I say: you're welcome, I'm not."

Well, she didn't understand it but she did believe me. She gave my offer thoughtful consideration and then said, "Nah. I'd rather fish with you."

And *that* was a compliment of the highest order.

Feeling well-loved and very smug, I settled back once more. I had plans not to move for the rest of the day, or at least until it was time for one of Chris's dinners up at Loch Moose Lodge. Ilanith settled back too, looking much the same.

It was enough to lean back and appreciate the loch, laugh at the antics of the otters at one end and the odders at the other, and not catch so much as a fry.

Something hovered around us. It had the right amount of legs to be an insect but not one I'd ever seen before so I cocked an eye to watch. I couldn't tell at first glance if it was native Mirabilan or one of our imports. It made an odd kind of whining noise.

Ilanith was watching it, too. Elly's kids are born jasons, I'm finding out. She wanted a look at its genes as much as I did.

The object of our mutual interest lit on my arm. The whine cut off just as suddenly. Afraid to disturb it, I moved my head, *not* my arm, for a closer look—just as it bit me.

I slapped it flat.

"Mama Jason!"

I'd sure as hell shocked Ilanith all right. "Vacation's over," I said. "And you can do a gene-read on a mashed bug just as easily as you can on a live one if you move fast enough. Now, *move!*"

We did. Rowed like hell for shore, charged up the path to Loch Moose Lodge. Ilanith, being all of twelve, took the lead early on. I could hear her shouting instructions to all and sundry before I reached the first crest. By the time I reached the lodge, half of Elly's kids stood wide-eyed in the hallway.

"You *smashed* it?" said Jen, the nine-year-old. "Really smashed it?"

"Yes," I said, thrusting out my arm to show her the evidence. "Where's Ilanith?"

Mouth agape, Jen just pointed up the stairs. When I headed up, she trailed behind. The rest of them were too astonished to move that fast. I'd obviously scandalized the whole troop. "Elly!" wailed one of the smaller ones, "Elleee!"

In my room, Ilanith had already brought up the computer and linked it to my lab. My kit was spread out across the bed as if it had been upended and dumped. It probably had, come to think of it.

Scowling ferociously, Ilanith scooped the remains of the bug from my arm none too gently and stuffed a sample into the analyzer.

"You take half," I said. "Run your own gene-read. We'll compare notes when you're done."

That set her face to warring with itself. Disapproval of my outrageous behavior met the sheer delight of being asked to help out. The battle was still in progress when she vanished from the room with her sample.

Freed from the distraction, I got to business. The first step was the computer's. Once I set that going, I took the time to gather my kit back together.

As I packed away the last of my gear, Elly appeared at the doorway, Aklilu on one hip, a fist on the other. Behind her, just visible enough for me to see small child glowers, were the rest of the kids. The faintest of smiles tugged the corner of Elly's lips. "I've had complaints about you," she said.

Jen said, "She *smashed* it, Elly! She even *showed* us!"

Elly laid a reassuring hand on Jen's shoulder and said, "I hope you've got a good explanation, Annie. You're the one who's always telling us not to trash with the wildlife unless there's a good reason for it." Elly Raiser Roget is a small woman but her mother-tones could stop a kangaroo rex in midcharge.

Feeling more than a little defensive, I dropped my eyes to my arm. A small bump had raised. I jabbed a finger at it. "I also tell you not to take stupid chances. I don't think I slapped it fast enough."

Elly slid Aklilu down onto the floor beside her, let go of Jen and reached for my arm. "An allergic reaction? Annie, should I phone for Doc Agbabian?"

I shook my head. "A minor allergic reaction. The same as you'd get if the damn thing had bitten you. I don't need the doc but it'd be a big help if you'd take a sample of that for me so I can analyze it, too. I can't reach it left-handed."

Elly obliged. "If it bit you, it's not Mirabilan," she said.

"Right." Most of the Mirabilan wildlife doesn't like the way humans taste. At least, the native bloodsuckers don't. The swarming horrors only like humans for their sweat, and they're bad enough to give anybody nightmares, which gives you some idea how they got their name. "We need insectivores," I said aloud.

Elly'd heard that complaint often enough that she ignored it. "So whatever bit you was something we brought with us." She squinted slightly at me. "And you think you know what or you wouldn't have smashed it."

"I hope I'm wrong. But I couldn't take the chance, Elly."

That satisfied her, but not the kids. The computer's beep for attention gave me a chance to escape their massed frowns. I pulled over a chair and settled down for a look at the gene-read. It was an import, all right.

I keyed for ships' records. Jen had shoved up close to scowl at the screen. I scooped her into my lap and said, "Get me the gene library."

She did. Then she craned her head around and said, "You want insects, right?"

"Right."

She misspelled 'insects' on the first try but made it fine on the second.

"Hold it there," I said. "Before you set the computer to searching the whole section for a match, we try a guess." Arms on either side of her, my chin on her shoulder, I keyed in for "mosquito." Then we waited.

"This takes a *long* time, Mama Jason!"

Well, not really—but at that age they've got a different time sense. "If I remember right, the computer's got some three hundred species to check through," I said. "See how long it would take *you* if you had to do it by hand!" The longer it took, the better, as far as I was concerned: I was hoping the search *wouldn't* turn up a match. From Elly's deepened frown, I could tell she'd recognized the "mosquito" and was hoping just as hard as I was.

No such luck. The computer beeped a potential match. Jen whooped and dived for the keyboard to call up a display.

I called back the gene-read on the thing I'd smashed and laid the images side by side. "Well, Jen? What do you say?"

She took her time considering, touching a fingertip to first one image then the other. At last she leaned back and said, "I think they're the same, Mama Jason."

"Yes," I said, "I'm afraid they are."

Jen bounced off my lap with a second whoop. "We've got a match!" She caught up Aklilu's hands. "We've got a match!" Within moments, the entire troop was dancing about the room to the same chant.

That was what Ilanith walked in on. Give her credit—it didn't disappoint her in the slightest. "I take it I don't have to search insects. Want to compare notes, Mama Jason?" She brought her results up on the screen and made the same careful examination that Jen had between her gene-read and the one from ships' records. "It's a match. That means you had a good idea what it was when you slapped it. And *that* means it's not something we want loose on Mirabile. . . . What's a mosquito?"

Elly stared at her. "I thought you were reading Thoholte this year—her *Laughing Gods* is downright eloquent on the subject of mosquitoes."

Even as the match dance weaved around her, Ilanith shuffled her own feet for a very different reason. She didn't answer for a long moment and when she did it was: "I was reading up on genetics, Mama Jason. I don't have *time* for all this fiction stuff."

Elly cocked an eye at me over Ilanith's head. I knew what was wanted and I obliged. "How do you think I recognized the damn thing when it bit me? I've read *Laughing Gods*. Kiddo, with whole chunks missing from ships' records, we've got to make do with what we've got: Maybe we've got a complete set of gene-reads for the Earth authentic insects, maybe *not*. Part of a jason's job is to know the available sources. Fiction's sometimes as useful as nonfiction. If I hadn't read Thoholte, we'd be twiddling our thumbs while the computer spent the night searching for that match."

Ilanith jumped on that as an excuse to change the subject. "So we've got the match . . . now what?"

"Now, if Elly will lend me the troops, we're going down to Loch Moose to see how many of those little fiends we can net."

"Nets," said Elly. "I know. Chris has cheesecloth in the kitchen—that will do for nets."

"I'll go," Ilanith said.

"*You,*" I said, catching her before she could make good her escape, "will go read Thoholte. I want you to know exactly what we're up against."

Our sweep of the lake was more enthusiastic than efficient, what with a half-dozen kids of all ages flailing about with cheesecloth nets, but every adult staying at the lodge had come along to join the hunt. No point calling in the team from the lab when I had so many willing hands; the team's *always* short-handed. With me on vacation (vacation, hah), all the more so.

I had my doubts that we'd accomplish anything—not because the hunters were amateurs, but because of the scope of the problem. *Any* Earth import might have been the source of that mosquito. I knew about half of the waterlilies were incubating dragonflies. The other half might be the source of the mosquitoes. Or the dragonflies themselves might be laying mosquito eggs these days. For insects, there are just too many possible sources. We'd have to run gene-reads on every Earth authentic plant and animal in the forest. By the time we identified the source, chances were the mosquitoes would already have a viable population established.

Having read what I'd read about mosquitoes, the prospect looked downright grim. Aside from their pure nuisance qualities, mosquitoes would be a disease vector. I suppose I should be grateful for small favors that the folks back on Earth hadn't included disease genes on their "keeper" list. But we have diseases of our own to worry about and I could have done without a vector. Up to now, we've been handling Sanoshan fever with a combination of quarantine and a short-lived vaccine—mosquitoes might change that completely.

So the adults and the little ones all caught bugs—to much crowed delight. Kept Jen busy running their samples up to the lodge. I had an evening's worth of gene-reading ahead of me and I was not looking forward to it. For the moment, at least, their good time was infectious. Even the odders stopped their playing to watch.

Filippo managed to fall in the loch not just once but twice, to be fished out each time by his sister Darice. (Luckily, the whole troop swims like odders, but some days I don't know how Elly stands it—just watching them is hair-raising.) Morien insisted on showing each of her catches to everyone—she seemed to be specializing in dragonflies. Even Aklilu caught bugs, with more than a little assistance from Elly, I suspect.

We were beginning to lose the light, though. Elly rowed in close. "Look, Mama Jason!" said Aklilu. "Look bug!"

I looked bug. "Good catch," I told him. "I've never seen one like that before."

His eyes got big. "Oh," he said, clutching his net and staring at his bug, "Dragon's tooth."

Dragon's tooth is slang for chimera. What the folks back on Earth hadn't counted on was that those hidden back-up genes might mix—and every so often blossom into new and genuinely exotic lifeforms. Neither fish nor fowl but a combination of the two.

No sense arguing definitions with Aklilu, though, so I didn't. Elly grinned at me and said, "Time to head in—on a note of triumph." She gave a sharp whistle and heads turned all around. "Head for shore," she shouted. There was some mutinous grumbling but not much. What Elly says goes. We all rowed for shore.

The fun was over; the rest of the evening would be pure and simple grub work. That it really was simple work meant I had Jen's extra hands to help me run samples, though, at least until she got bored with the repetitiveness of the job.

As it turned out, the first tap on my shoulder wasn't Jen's. It was Leo's and I got a real nice set of kisses as a follow-up. . . . I sighed, saved everything and switched the computer off. "Break for dinner."

"So much for your vacation," said Leo. "I seem to have missed all the excitement. Between the door and here, I have heard that Mama Jason smashed a bug—an *Earth authentic* bug, no less, that Aklilu caught a Dragon's tooth, that Mama Jason smashed a bug, that the entire population of the lodge played jason this afternoon, that Annie Jason Masmajean—defender of the kangaroo rex—*smashed a bug!* But I also see Elly is as close to a worried frown as I've ever known her to be, which means you must have had a very good reason for smashing the bug. Why don't you tell me all about it over dinner?"

If there's one thing Leonov Bellmaker Denness knows, it's the way to a woman's heart: good food, a sympathetic ear and a lot of necking. Not necessarily in that order. *After* the lot of necking, we went downstairs to the dining room, ordered Chris's special of the day, which was a good spicy hopfish bouillabaise, and I told him all about it.

I was instantly sorry I'd done it—all those deep-etched laugh lines in his face twisted away as if they'd never been there and his normally brown skin took on an undercast of green that was distinctly uncomplimentary. "Sorry," I said and took his hand in mine.

He shook his head. "I had kin on the *Sanoshan*. They were survivors.

I've seen their accounts of the last years aboard, when they weren't sure there'd be enough hands to make a landing—or if they dared even make a landing for fear of killing off the rest of the colonists. The thought of an insect vector for Sanoshan fever scares me silly. . . ."

"No," I said. "It had better scare you rational, if we want to do something about it. I've already warned Main Medical but I think you'd better put in a word, too. Chances are a survivor can really spur them into action."

Made me think how lucky I really was to have Leo. Eight hundred people died in the *Sanoshan* epidemic and there was nothing the other ships could do to help without infecting their own populations.

He nodded. "Tomorrow morning I break the bell out of its cast. Assuming it came out right, I thought I'd ask you to come along to RightHere and help me deliver it. Bell or no bell, I'll head for RightHere tomorrow and stop by Medical. If we want the entire population vaccinated, it'll take some time for them to gear up production. . . ."

"Leo, I'm selfish as all hell. I want Elly and the kids vaccinated *now*—and you, too."

"I'm an immune, Annie. If you doubt me, you can check a cell sample right now. How about you?"

I hadn't even thought of it.

Leo read my expression and said, "I thought not—and you're the one with the mosquito bite. *You* will get your vaccination updated." The laugh lines came back into his face. "Can't have you setting a bad example for Elly's kids!"

I hate vaccinations but he was right. I'd do it. If I worked hard, I might even be able to do it with some sort of grace. I tried to wipe the scowl off my face but I obviously didn't succeed because Leo laughed.

"I don't care how grudgingly you do it, Annie, as long as you do it."

At that point, Susan came out of nowhere, threw her arms around Leo's shoulders and said, "What's Mama Jason doing now, Noisy—grudgingly or otherwise?"

"Getting vaccinated for Sanoshan fever," he told her. "What about you? When was the last time you were vaccinated for it?"

"Me? Two years ago." Susan threw her arms around me. "Elly's a stickler for keeping up on vaccinations."

I hugged her back hard out of sheer relief. Should have known Elly would take care of something like that. I'd double-check for safety's sake but I felt better already. "Next question," I began.

Susan pushed back and grinned. "Mike found the lab computer searching through mosquito gene-reads. When it signaled a match, he checked the origin of the request. We drew straws over who got to come up to

Loch Moose to help you out—I cheated. Now you're asking if I've been vaccinated for Sanoshan fever. . . . I'll go tell Mike we guessed right."

I stopped her. "Tell Mike I want everybody on the team revaccinated by the end of the week."

"Done," she said and vanished as quickly as she'd come. When she reappeared, she pulled up a chair and settled at our table. Chris put a bowl in front of her, gave her a hug and a spoon and said, "Eat up—it's good for the ecology!"

Between mouthfuls, Susan asked questions. Being sixteen makes them impatient for answers. I did my best, with Leo's help, but when she got to "Where are they coming from?" I *had* no answer.

"From Leo's pansies, for all I know." That was the hell of it—they could be coming from anything.

Susan, temporarily incapacitated by a mouthful of bouillabaise, shook her head violently. Leo said, "*Not* from my pansies. I can vouch for every one of them."

Susan swallowed hastily. "S'truth, Mama Jason. I showed Noisy how to read for secondary and tertiary helices so he could check them. I double-checked the first batch for him but he was doing fine so the rest I let him handle."

I stared at Leo. It must have been the wrong kind of stare because he shifted in his seat and looked apologetic and said, "You're always complaining about being short-handed, Annie. Since I was the one who wanted the pansies in the first place, it's only fair I look after them myself." He let it hang a minute, then he added, "Ilanith double-checked them, in case I missed anything."

There was another pause. My fault. I was still too surprised to say anything. Leo and Susan looked at each other. Then Leo said, "I'm not about to apologize for stepping on your turf, Annie. It was fun finding out what's hiding in my patch of pansies."

I threw up my hands. "Fun? I don't need an apology—I'm pleased as all hell. What *is* hiding in your patch of pansies?"

So it was back to the computer, this time to link up to Leo's across the loch, for the list. Most of it was pansy-related, which was a relief. The dog-tooth violets seemed like a nice idea, as did the spring beauties. Some insects but not many and those in the offing were harmless, except for the one that promised cutworms somewhere down the line. One more demonstration of how badly we need insectivores. I tapped it on the screen.

"Susan told me to pull and burn that one," Leo said.

That would have been my decision too and I told him so. "Our rice crop's in enough trouble from the hopfish without adding cutworms to the stew. And I doubt even Chris could come up with a recipe that made cutworms appetizing."

"Just don't let *her* hear you disparage her talents," Leo said with a grin.

I looked at the list again. "We could do with some of your butterflies. Blue butterfly, ok, but pull the cabbage butterfly—"

"Pulled and burned."

This time I turned my chair to have a good look at him. "You're way ahead of me on this, aren't you?"

He spread his hands. "I'm bored with the bellmaking and I'm too old to go back to opening new territory—but this is a kind of scouting, too. Why do you think I hang around with you all the time?"

I gave him the hairy eyeball I'd learned from Susan in her younger days and said, "And here I thought it was my good looks!"

"It is," he said. He tapped the screen. "*This* is gravy. The least I can do is keep tabs on my pansy patch. And, before you ask, we tagged every last one of them. You can pull or coddle the rest at your leisure."

"My leisure. . . . Now that would be a lovely thought. You have saved me one helluva lot of trouble. And, if you're serious about this 'fun' of yours, why don't you give us a hand with the insects we caught this afternoon?"

I haven't seen a human being light up like that since I told Susan *she* could help with the gene-reads. Crinkles of the best kind all over that face and a flash of grin like—well, that must be what fireflies were like.

The thought made me reconsider the list. "Still no fireflies." I keep hoping. My best candidates for producing them were the waterlilies in Loch Moose but so far they'd only hatched shrimp. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. There are enough of them that I eat Chris's barbequed shrimp regularly—and we were able to stock two other lakes with them this spring.

"Maybe your fireflies will turn up in this afternoon's catch. Give me a bunch of samples and I'll start looking." He held out those beautiful huge hands of his . . . so I gave him a long kiss and filled his hands with jars and sent him off to grub through genes with the rest of us.

Shortly after that Ilanith popped in with her fingers stuck into Elly's hardback copy of *Laughing Gods* in no less than three places. "This is terrific, Mama Jason! Listen to this," she said and read me five pages of Thoholte's epic battle with the mosquitoes. Then she added, "No wonder you smashed it! Did she write anything else?"

"Lots," I told her, "Check the library index," and shooed her out before she could read me the next five pages she'd finger-marked. Makes me wonder what goes through kids' minds sometimes. Would I make her read a book *I* didn't like? I may be old but I'm sure as hell not senile.

Susan, having finished her dinner, stuck her head in the door. "Where's the mosquito you mashed, Mama Jason? I want to try something."

I pulled out the sample for her. "What something?"

"I've been thinking—if it's possible to read the helices to find out what's coming next, shouldn't it be possible to back-track to see where it came *from?*"

"Damned if I know," I said. "I don't think anybody's ever tried it. You'll have to do it manually—computer's not set up for that—but if it works I'll see you get a bonus week off this year."

"Hah! Like your vacation, I bet." She didn't wait for an answer. Not that she had to—most likely she was right.

I growled something about my lost vacation to the empty doorway. It wasn't Elly I meant to growl at, but Elly's sudden appearance made it seem just that.

"No arguments," Elly said. She jabbed a finger at me and said, "And this one, Suvendi."

Before I could so much as acknowledge Suvendi Doc Agbabian, he had my sleeve shoved up and was shooting me full of vaccine. I didn't argue.

Except for a sighting of the Loch Moose Monster, the rest of the evening was uneventful.

Early next morning just about everybody at the lodge rowed across the loch to Leo's place to watch him break the bell from its cast. Fancy piece of casting—covered top to lip with relief work. When he'd shined it up a bit, Susan shouted, "Odders! Look, it's all over odders!" That was something of an exaggeration—there were just as many pansies as there were odders—but it was one helluva bell.

Leo strung the clapper, then we tossed a rope over a rafter, hefted the thing up and gave it a try. The bell rang out loud and sweet—a deep, deep bong that must have startled every animal for miles around. We tied the rope off temporarily and retreated outside, holding our ears, while each kid took a turn ringing it. After the first two rings, the odders took to bellowing in response, which seemed about right. Even Aklilu got it to sound, though Jen told us later he'd had to swing from the pull to do it.

It was two hours before we got it packed into my hover and headed for RightHere. From Loch Moose to RightHere it's all up-river, which is nice smooth hovering, and there are plenty of places to stay along the way. We made a four-day trip of it.

Must have signed a dozen guest books along the way—most of them for folks we didn't actually stay with, which was cheating a bit—but how often does a bell that size go by? Everybody wanted a peek at it and a remembrance of the occasion. For once, nobody was disappointed when

Leo signed himself "Leo *Bellmaker* Denness" instead of "Leo Opener Denness."

Except maybe Leo. He *had* said he was getting tired of bellmaking.

The second night there was a General Delivery call out for me from Susan at Loch Moose. It was the one I was waiting for but hadn't been expecting, if you follow that. . . . She didn't even say hello, just started out with, "It works, Mama Jason! I back-tracked it! And a friend of Elly's volunteered to hack it into the computer so next time it won't take forever to do one."

Leo gave me a sidelong glance and said, "I take it she means she found out where the mosquito came from?"

"And that somebody's writing a program that will let us back-track fast next time," I said, finishing the translation. "—So where *did* the mosquito come from?" I asked Susan.

"One of Chris's tomato plants. We're doing gene-reads on the whole bed now. So far only the one but . . ."

I sighed and finished for her, "But we'll have to check *every* tomato plant on Mirabile, for safety's sake. What did you do with the offender?"

"That's the second thing I called about. Chris wants to hold a ceremonial burning. Any reason why not? It's her tomato plant."

"Fair is fair," I told her. "But I can think of a major reason why not: you know how people get carried away. I *don't* want every tomato plant on Mirabile roasted. Check the whole bed first, do the same for any other beds in the area, *then* burn the offenders. Tell Chris to make sure the spinners and gossips see her selecting *specific* plants for the fire."

She'd have done it then and there but I held up a finger and said, "And remind her she's Chris *Jason* Maryanska in a case like this. She should also cook up one of those stuffed tomato things for anybody who comes for the show. That'd help—they taste something that good they'll be much less likely to burn the inoffensive plants."

"Right. Chris'll love that, Mama Jason. We'll get on it first thing in the morning." She laughed suddenly. "You know what Chris calls that recipe, Mama Jason?"

I shook my head.

" 'Tomato *Surprise*.' "

RightHere is the closest thing on Mirabile to a city in the Earth authentic style. It has paved roads, stone buildings, and it's home to ships' library. Kind of pretty from a distance, since it sits on an estuary and looks out over Greenglass Sea. A little too constricted for my taste, I think. There's talk of putting in street lights—which means the cheerups will probably move out—and I like to listen to the cheerups carol to each other all night.

Leo dropped me off on a corner and headed on to Main Medical. First things first, he said. He had samples of everything, plus a ten-pound printout of the disease-carrying history of mosquitoes. If that wasn't enough to reinforce our suggestion that medical gear up to revaccinate everybody on Mirabile for Sanoshan fever, he'd hit them with the horror stories his family had passed down three generations, which would most certainly do it.

I went straight to Jason's Hall to see if the past four days had brought them any more luck establishing insectivores on Mirabile than the past three generations had.

Sabah Jason Al-Sumidaie met me just inside the door with: "No, Annie, we haven't had a bit of luck with songbirds here, either."

"I knew it was too much to ask."

So we sat down to compare notes and bitches over tea. Sabah clicked his tongue over my mosquito bite and we both drank a hearty curse to those long-dead geneticists back on Earth who'd caused us this problem.

They'd tried a dozen new kinds of songbird since I'd last checked more than the names and the viability. Not one of them had survived. Looking over their records, I saw the same sort of pattern I'd been seeing in my environmental conditions—Mirabile's native life was so hostile to songbirds that even Dragon's Teeth didn't survive to breed a second generation, not in either EC.

When I said as much out loud, Sabah said, "M-hm. Either the eggs get eaten or the adults do. I think we'll have to put someone on insectivores full time. I don't see any other way to solve the problem."

I snorted. "Full time."

"You know what I mean, Annie. Full time except for emergencies."

"We also need somebody full-time on Mirabilan wildlife. *That* might give us a handle on what birds we should be choosing."

"If I get you the salaries, can you get me the bodies? I mean it, Annie, full-time as much as practical."

Makes me nosy when Sabah talks like that. "If you've got the salaries, why haven't you got the bodies?"

Sabah twinkled at me. "We're civilized here in RightHere. It's Mama Jason and her team of Dragon's Tooth Hunters that attracts the youngsters."

"Get stuffed," I told him, with a smile. I've heard some stories in my time but *that*. . . .

"I'm serious, Annie. I could name you three kids in town that would kill to work with you. But not here and not with us. It's a matter of perception."

"Send 'em to me. I'll read 'em the riot act about a proper apprenticeship—with you."

Sabah put down his glass of tea. "You know, that might just work."

"If it doesn't, at least *I* wind up with extra hands," I said. "And now that we've solved that problem, let's see if we can do something about the damned insectivores."

We didn't solve that one, of course. Not likely we'd solve in one afternoon what hadn't been solved in the three generations we'd been on Mirabile. But we did know a lot of things that *wouldn't* work by the time we were done.

When we got tired of beating our heads against this particular wall, I checked my mail. Susan had sent along a preliminary program for backtracking the source of a Dragon's Tooth with a notation: "Marian says it's not 'elegant' but it ought to hold us while she whips a better one."

" 'Elegant'?" said Sabah.

"Hacker-talk," I explained. "Means, as far as I can tell, the program's not as efficient as it might be. Same use of 'elegant' as in mathematics."

There was a gosh-wow from Chris, too. Then I cast about a bit and found the expected one from Leo. It read: "Scared the daylights out of medical. I'll be at the cathedral." It ended with a whole slew of bare hug graphics. When I turned back to Sabah, he was grinning like nobody's business.

"You didn't tell me you had a new beau, Annie," he said in mock accusation.

"You didn't ask," I countered. Knowing what would come next, I held up both hands to fend him off. "I've been officially proposed to—and I mean to accept as soon as I can think of an appropriate courting gift. That last is not as easy as it sounds. *He* gave *me* a kangaroo rex."

Sabah's eyes went wide. "I'm impressed. That alone makes it sound like a match. Who is this wonder?"

"His name's Leonov Bellmaker Denness—used to be Leonov Opener D—"

Sabah raised hands to cut me off. "I know Leo, Annie. He's making the bell for our cathedral." His raised hands landed on my shoulders. "*Good* combination, you and Leo! And I don't mean just genetically."

"Good. Then maybe you can show me where this 'cathedral' thing is. He's there delivering your bell now."

With a shout that he was off for the rest of the day, Sabah hustled me to the door. " 'Cathedral' is guild tongue for a large and very ornate stone building used for ritual purposes," he explained, as he led the way. (Only the member of a guild uses the phrase 'guild tongue' without specifying *what* guild. I wasn't about to ask. Tends to set them to proselytizing about how much *fun* you'd have if you joined the Nippon Guild or the

Texas Guild or whatever.) "How long *has* it been since you've been to RightHere?"

"Years, at least."

"Hm, and you don't pay much attention to anything other than Dragon's Teeth."

"Except the kids and Leo," I corrected.

"Then you're in for a surprise."

Well, I have to admit—Sabah was right on that count. I've never seen a building that big in my *life*, except in pictures in ships' records. You could have stuck the entire population of RightHere inside it with room to spare.

And "ornate" didn't begin to describe it. More than half the damn thing was a solid mass of vaults and spires and carvings. The rest was still rough-shaped—blocks holding up the portico where (I assumed) there'd soon be more figures to match those on the other side of the entrance.

I was so busy gawking that Sabah startled me when he grabbed my arm. "Hunh?" I said.

"One thing, Annie. When the guild finds out who you are, they're gonna hit you up for bats. They already did me—I told them we didn't have the time for frivolities—but that doesn't stop them from persisting. So feel free to say no."

"Bats," I said, not taking my eyes off the cathedral, "Say no. Gotcha." And I went for a closer look.

The entire history of Mirabile was carved into the walls of the cathedral. Here was the take-off from Earth (though some of those plants were Mirabilan, not Earth authentic) to the generations in journey (including a very authentic and gruesome portrayal of Sanoshan fever) to the landing and the opening. I was fascinated as all hell to find a much younger Leo among the openers and Grandaddy Jason locked in ferocious battle with a double helix. Aside from that first panel, the artist had done a damn realistic job.

"Check the caryatids," said Leo, as he came down the wide staircase from the center doors. I bussed him instead, then I asked him, "What the hell's a caryatid?" He pointed to the figures holding up the roof. Took me a minute to place the faces—the captains of the ships—absolutely right, down to the desperation on the face of that last captain of the *Sanoshan*. Tiny figures at the feet of each gave further details of shipboard life under each particular captaincy.

"Now look up," Leo said—and pointed.

I craned my neck and stepped back. Glaring down at me, mouths gaping, was the damnedest collection of Dragon's Teeth ever assembled in the history of Mirabile. I was standing, I found, directly under a kangaroo rex—not a face you'd forget if you'd seen it live the way I had.

The artist had captured it so well that it seemed poised to leap on its prey.

I shifted position.

From the side, I could see every last bit of musculature under the hide of the damn thing. And, yes, it was set to spring on its prey. Every inch of it just about vibrated, right down to the shadow of stripes across its haunches.

I let out a whistle of pure admiration.

Leo said, "You got it right, Bethany. See if you didn't."

Which reminded me Leo was there, not that I ever really forget. I turned to find him grinning and pushing a pixie in my direction. "Bethany, meet Annie Jason Masmajean. Annie, this is Bethany Carver Barandemaje."

She was as tiny as Leo is big but the resemblance was unmistakable. "One of your kids, yes?" I stuck out a hand and got a tiny but very wiry and very callused hand in return.

"One of my three favorites," Leo said. He was still grinning shamelessly.

"Good thing you've only got three," Bethany told him, "or we'd be forced to take matters in hand."

"And I'd find myself sand-blasted into the shape of a chimera and spending the rest of my life pouring water down on the world."

I couldn't help myself. "Why put Dragon's Teeth—even one based on Leo—on a cathedral?"

"Oh," she said, "It's traditional. Only on Earth they called them gargoyles. I thought a Mirabilan cathedral ought to have Mirabilan gargoyles. It's part of the drainage system—after a rain, they spout water from their mouths. Come on up and have a closer look before we lose all the light."

The closer look was even more impressive. I laid my hand on the kangaroo rex's flank and discovered that I could *feel* every one of those bunched muscles. It was almost disturbing that the only difference between Bethany's kangaroo rex and the live ones I'd touched was that there was a chill to the stone one. "I'd hate to mess with that," I said, which set both Leo and Bethany off in chuckles.

Still laughing, they dragged me up entirely too many flights of stairs to the belfry. "Belfry" is another guild term, I take it—it means the spire they were to hang Leo's bell in. If I'd thought the view from RightHere was beautiful, the view from the belfry was a stunner. The entire town and harbor were spread out below us. As cold as the prospect might be (the windows weren't glassed in), I promised myself I'd stop back in the winter to see what RightHere looked like under a mantel of snow.

Now we were losing the light, so Bethany lit a torch—a real torch, straight out of historical dramas, which gives you some idea how seriously the guild takes its play—and led us back to the stairwell.

I said to Leo, "D'you suppose she felt obligated to do all this carving with a hammer and chisel?"

He snorted with laughter. "That torch is gasoline-fed, Annie, burns a lot cleaner than wood. And she uses state-of-the-art to do her carving. No way she could have done so much in so short a time without it."

We followed Bethany all the way back to her house. Turned out Leo had arranged for us to stay there as long as we were in town. I suspect this is Leo's way of introducing me to all his kids and grandkids. Who am I to object? I was beginning to like Leo's genes as much as I liked Leo. I hadn't actually looked at them, mind you, but the results seemed to be consistently good, even to the grandkids.

Bethany had two bouncing around the household, about the same age as Jen, which meant I had to tell about the kangaroo rex all over again. Leo made eyebrows at me all through the telling.

When I finished, Arkady asked, "What did you give *him* for a courting present, Annie?" "Yeah!" demanded Vassily, "What did you give him?"

"Nothing yet. I don't know what to give him for a courting present. Maybe you two have some ideas?"

"Oh, yes!"

I hushed them instantly. "Not in front of Leo! I want to surprise him! We'll talk about it when he isn't around."

So Bethany hustled them off to bed amid conspiratorial whispers and giggles and promises of tomorrow.

"Hope they come up with a good idea," Leo said with a grin.

"Me too." I grinned back. It was a good enough excuse to neck some, so we did. After a while, when we came up for air, I said, "Oh, well. Hold that thought, Leo. I still have work to do tonight." So Leo wound up looking over my shoulder while I went through the hard copy on birds one more time.

Not that it did me any good. Staring at genes wasn't going to make them viable. If we knew what was killing the birds off we might be able to twitch the genes around a little. For all I knew, the Earth authentic birds were eating something Mirabilan and dropping dead on the spot. Damnify knew what—maybe the swarming horrors. I dropped the hard copy in a heap on the table and only then realized that Leo had wandered off. "Deserter," I said.

"You've been talking about birds for months now," Leo said, looking up from the computer. "The only birds I've seen are ducks and chickens and Cornish fowls. I want to see the kind you're interested in."

"Oh. Let me. I know where they're hidden in ships' records." I pulled up a chair and found some birds for Leo—not gene-reads but photos of the animals themselves. "There," I said. "That's a pretty characteristic bird."

I turned to find him frowning at the screen. "It's different from what you're used to but I wouldn't think it deserves a scowl."

"Do ships' records include any photos of them in motion, Annie?"

When Leo asks a question in that tone, he's got a damn good reason for asking. So I tapped a little deeper and found him some motion pictures of various birds. He watched the birds, I watched him. The frown deepened the longer he watched.

At last he said, "Find me a motion picture of each of the birds you've tried to establish on Mirabile."

So I went down the list, both Sabah's and mine. It took about an hour to satisfy him, though toward the end less than a minute of film was sufficient before he called for the next one. "That's it," I said, turning off the computer. "That's the lot."

The frown wrinkled into pure sadness. "Shall I tell you why you couldn't get any of those established on Mirabile, Annie?"

"If you don't voluntarily, I'll sic your grandchildren on you!"

That brought a smile back to his face. He raised both hands and said, "I volunteer. —Annie, all those birds move just like flurts." Then he waited.

I knew he was waiting for me to think about it, so I did. He was right. The Mirabilan flurt doesn't have feathers and it doesn't fly but it does move with the same bounce and hop as the birds I'd shown him. And it spent much of its time in trees. Its feet were built for climbing, not so well for walking.

Then I realized what Leo was getting at. "The whompems are eating them!"

"I'd bet money on it," Leo said. "The whompems eat your birds thinking they're flurts. Obviously, your birds don't poison the whompems either."

"We've spent years feeding the whompems. Shit."

"Sorry, Annie."

"Good grief, Leo, don't be *sorry*. We could have spent years *more* feeding the whompems. Now we have to think of something else."

I brought the computer up once more to leave a note for Sabah telling him what we'd been doing wrong (and giving Leo full credit). Then I dragged him off to bed to thank him properly.

Nothing quite like a good night's romp to clear the mind. If we'd been going at the problem wrong, then we needed to come at it from another angle. The very first thing I did (after breakfast) was to set Leo the task of looking through the file for any bird that *wouldn't* attract the predatory attention of a whompem. The Cornish fowls hadn't been eaten by whompems, so I had some hope for the project—and Leo seemed enthusiastic about helping out.

Then I hunted up Bethany's kids. "Okay," I said, "you promised me a suggestion for Leo's courting gift."

"Right," said Vassily. He gave a glance at Arkady that made me instantly suspect mischief, then the two of them glanced around furtively—checking, it seemed, where their dad had gotten to. Dad was out of earshot. Still, Vassily beckoned me closer.

By now I was curious as all hell to find out what the two of them were up to. I bent down and turned an ear close.

"Bats!" Vassily whispered. The whisper was loud enough to bring a vigorous nod of agreement from Arkady.

Bats. Where had I heard about bats, and just recently too? Ah, from Sabah. I was not to let the guild hassle me for bats.

"Bats," I said aloud. "That's it? Last night you had 'lots' of suggestions."

Arkady drew himself up and said, "Bats is best."

"And you think Leo would like this bats thing?" I'd spoken in a normal tone of voice. The two of them hastily shushed me, drawing a curious look from dad.

"Oh, yes," came the answer, still whispered. "Leo would like you-know-whats best of all."

"All right," I whispered back. "I'll look into it and see if I agree with you. Thanks for the suggestion."

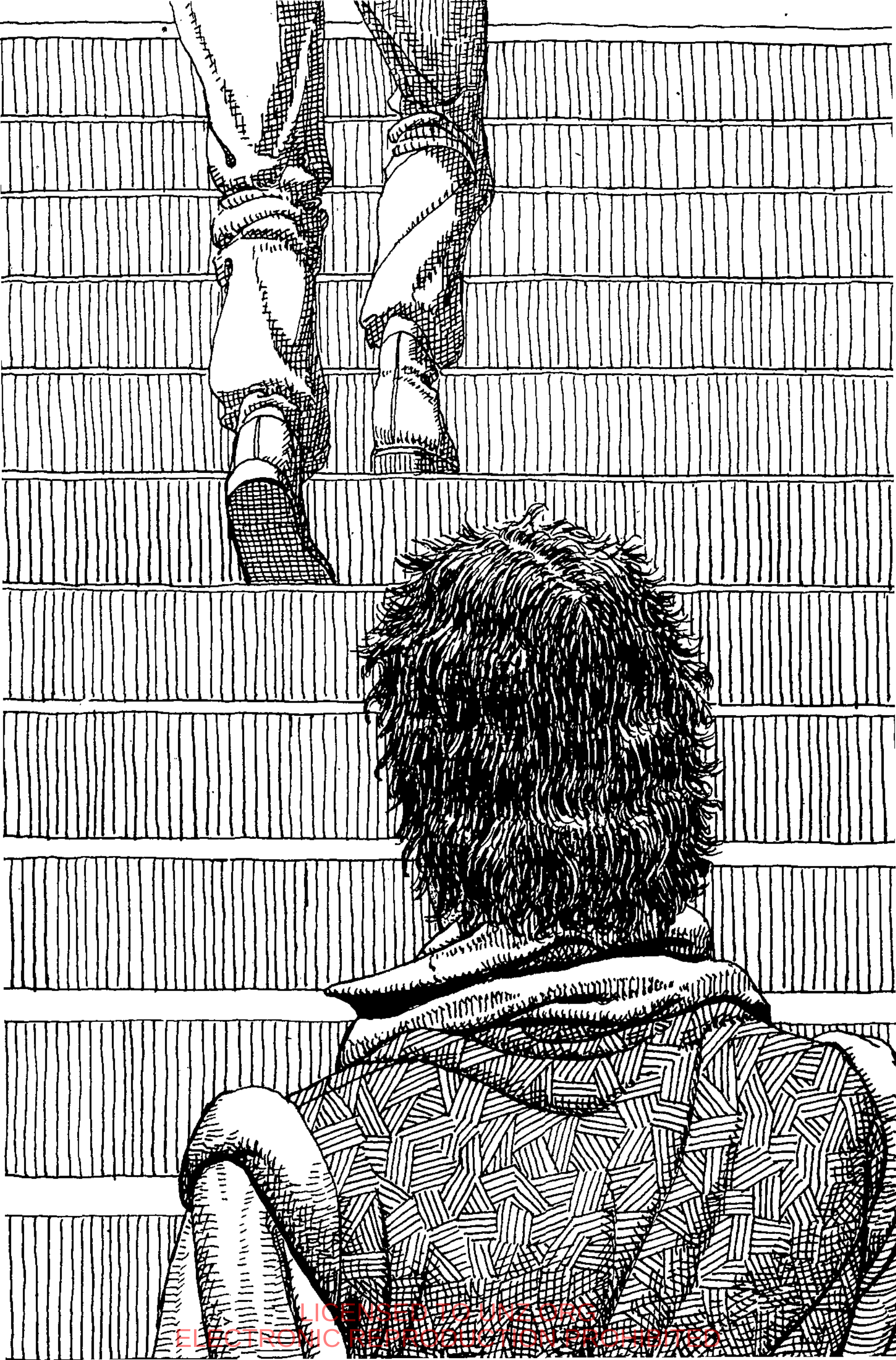
I left the two of them hugging each other in what looked to me like triumph and headed out for another look at the cathedral. That day I could have found it from the noise alone or from the cloud of rock dust Bethany's carving raised.

When I got within view of what she was doing, I didn't interrupt her at once. For one thing, I wasn't sure I should distract her while she was carving. For another, it was a treat to watch as she freed another Dragon's Tooth from its chunk of rock. I didn't recognize this one—so it must have been something from the local EC that Sabah and his team had taken care of. Even now, it was in the act of raising a clublike foot as if to bash in a skull.

The foot raised, there was a sudden startling silence. Bethany had turned off her carver and doffed her elaborate facemask. "Annie! You shouldn't be hanging out here without a mask—this stuff is hell on your lungs."

"I didn't intend to hang out. I got suckered into watching you . . . find the Dragon's Tooth."

She looked enormously pleased at that. One hand went up to the stone. She meant, I think, simply to brush away the stone dust but the gesture



turned into a caress. I couldn't blame her—all her creatures wanted patting, even the ones that looked like they'd take your hand off for trying.

After a minute, she turned. "Did you come to watch us install the bell? If so, you're about an hour early."

I shook my head. "I came to ask about these bat things you folks seem to want."

"Oh, no! The kids!" She looked stricken. "Annie, I'm so sorry. Leo made us promise not to hassle you for bats. I made the kids promise. . . . Wait till I get my hands on those little monsters!"

I had to hold up both my hands to stop her. "The kids didn't ask me for bats for your guild! I won't have you punishing them either—when all they did was suggest that I give Leo bats as a courting present." And I couldn't help laughing. "Clever pair, too. Wish you could have seen them at it. You'd have been proud of them."

"I'm afraid I can imagine." She laughed. Through her laughter, she managed to get out, "I am sorry, though, Annie."

"Don't be. Tell me about the bats."

"There's nothing much to tell. Besides bells, belfries are reputed to have bats. They're *supposed* to have bats. I did the next best thing. Come on, I'll show you."

So it was up the stairs to the belfry all over again. This time, she pointed up to the ceiling. First time there, I'd been so caught up by the view outside that I hadn't seen the view inside: the entire ceiling was carved.

"That's what they look like—the bats. We couldn't talk Sabah into making us some, so I carved them in. But that won't satisfy most of the guildmembers."

The bats wanted petting too, or at least a much closer look. The buttressed ceiling was covered with them—hundreds of them. At first it wasn't easy to make out individual details, then I realized they were all hanging by their feet, faces downward. And it was the damndest collection of faces I'd ever seen—huge outsized ears, noses that looked more like leaves than noses. There were even a dozen or so that seemed to have Pushy's old-boot head. Most of those with their mouths open showed needle-sharp teeth. They had wings too, it seemed—not like birds' wings, though—more like, well, broken umbrellas. Hard to believe something like that was Earth authentic.

"You sure these aren't Dragon's Teeth?" I said.

Bethany grinned. "I got the pictures I worked with straight out of ships' records, Annie. They really do look like that. The only artistic license I took was—well, ordinarily you'd see only one kind of bat in a belfry. I put them all in. I liked their faces."

"I can see why. I'll see what I can do, Bethany. Mind you, I don't make any promises. First, I have to take a good look at what they'd do to the ecology. . . ." I suspected Sabah had already done that, since he'd warned me about the request, but a double-check never hurt anything and it would be something to take my mind off the birds long enough to give it a rest.

"Good enough, Annie. Uh—okay if I tell the rest of the guild members you're looking into it?"

"Why not? At least it will keep them from finding devious ways to mention the subject."

As long as I'd already climbed the stairs, I stuck around to watch them hang Leo's bell. Carved bats and cast pansies. Made me wonder what the folks back on Earth would have thought—d'you suppose they appreciate bats and pansies as much as Leo and his kin?

"We took a vote, Annie," Bethany said. The workers around her nodded agreement. "You get the first ring."

"Thanks," I said, "but it seems to me Leo ought to have the privilege. *I* haven't done anything yet."

There was some disappointment followed by a moment's discussion, then Bethany said, "She's right. Leo made the bell—he ought to get first ring. How about just at dusk? You'll bring him, Annie?" At my nod, she said, "At dusk, then."

So I headed back to Bethany's to tell Leo his plans for the evening. He was still at the computer. When I laid a hand on his shoulder, he said, "No luck so far, Annie, but I'm still looking."

"Take a break, Leo. Let me at the computer for a while."

"I can do this. I'm not bored—I'm fascinated. I had no idea how many kinds of birds there were.

I made shooing motions. "I have no intention of spoiling your fun. I just want to have a look at these bats."

That got his attention. "Annie, they didn't! They promised me!"

"They didn't," I said. "It was Sabah who told me about the bats. Anybody else, I had to ask. Now *will* you let me at the computer?"

He gave me his chair and drew up another. I went hunting for bats. The very first reference I found made my jaw drop. Tagged onto the description, almost as an afterthought, were the words, "Most bats are economically valuable because of the volume of insects they consume."

"But. . . ?" I did a quick test. No, asking the computer for a list of "insectivores" did *not* give you "bats." "Leo," I said, "we lost part of the index!" We knew we'd lost information from ships' records but that we'd lost indexing . . . God alone knew what was in the computer files—things we might need badly that we'd never know existed!

The first order of business then was a general bulletin to let everybody know there was information in the files that wasn't properly indexed and cross-referenced. Nobody was going to be happy to hear that. Still, a general bulletin meant that whenever somebody found something unindexed in the files, they'd tell library so it could be added.

When we'd done that (and dropped a note to the ships' librarians to cross-reference "bats" to "insectivores"), I went back to sort through the various kinds of bats. And I did it manually, file by file. After a while I had a goodly number of insectivorous bats that would do just fine not only in RightHere's EC but in the Loch Moose EC as well. In theory, at least.

In practice . . . I found motion pictures of each of the Earth authentic species that interested me. Some of them weren't very good—bats being largely nocturnal—but they'd have to do. "What do you say, Leo? Do these get eaten the minute we turn 'em loose?"

"Not by whompems," he said. "Not if they're nocturnal."

"So far so good," I said. "You keep thinking about it while I read up on bats."

But I didn't do that immediately. Instead I dropped a note to my own team which said, in its entirety: "Bats. Love, Annie." I knew that would be enough to get them started. That's why they're my favorite team. I also left a note for Sabah—that one said: "Bats, dammit, Sabah!" I signed it "Ann Jason Masmajean." I can't pull rank on Sabah but I made sure the graphics underscored the "Jason."

Then I got to the reading. The more I read about them, the more I liked them.

I admit the vampire bats gave me a momentary turn . . . until I found out they didn't much bother humans. Real pretty bioengineering—all designed to keep its prey from noticing it was being bled, which was more than you could say for the human culture back on Earth I'd once read about that bled cattle for their favorite beverage, a concoction of blood and milk. Curious, when Earth humans were doing that, that the vampire bat should have given all bats such a bad rap, the way it seemed to have. Maybe the problem was just that bats are nocturnal. If nobody knows what you do for sure, everybody suspects you.

Anyhow, I was interested in insectivores, which was the largest group. And when I found one that was noted for its mosquito catching, I knew in my heart I'd found my insectivore of choice. I turned the computer over to Leo and headed out for Stock.

That was Ashok Saver Ndamba's province. He'd turned the landing skiffs into a combination storage bin and museum and he ruled his territory with an iron hand. It always surprised me that he knew where everything was. Random access filing of the most eclectic sort. Luckily, there was nothing wrong with *his* indexing.

"Bats," he said. "I see the cathedral-builders got to you. You always were a softie."

"Who, me?" I said. "You must be thinking of somebody else. You know how badly we need insectivores?"

"Yes?"

"Bats," I said.

He looked up from his screen long enough for me to grin once and nod, then he shook his head and whistled. "I've got about five hundred kinds."

That didn't gibe with what I'd been reading. "Supposed to be twice that, according to the references I've been reading."

"Did you check the dates of the references? A lot of species went missing in the Bad Years. If it was extinct, they didn't send it with us."

I had to admit I hadn't checked dates. He was only partially right. By the time of the Mirabilan expedition, the geneticists had been reconstructing some of those extinct species. "Let's see what you've got. Here—this one—*Myotis lucifugus*. Let's start with that."

"At least you picked one we've got," he said and wandered off humming to himself to find the embryo stores. He wasn't humming when he came back. "Annie, I've got bad news."

"How bad?"

"Those idiots back on Earth stiffed us. I've got a sum total of forty embryos and even *I* know enough about jasoning to know that's not enough for a viable population."

I was not about to give up my mosquito-eaters without a fight. "Spare me what you can, then, Ashok. If I have to build 'em by hand, I will."

"For you, Annie, the whole batch, if you're willing to take them a few at a time. I also know enough to know that'll take some of the drudgery out of it."

"I accept."

We stayed just long enough in RightHere to give Leo first ring of the bell. I wasn't about to work in somebody else's lab when I could be home and surrounded by my own team. The message had done the job—by the time I walked in with my bat embryos, half the team was expert on the subject of bats.

This was not necessarily a good thing—it meant each and every one of them had a favorite bat to promote. "I brought *my* favorite," I said. "Anybody wants vampire bats can go get his own embryos."

Susan brightened perceptibly. "Really, Mama Jason?"

"Not really. That'd be a tough call. You'd have to do a lot of convincing. Any of the insectivores, fine. And somebody might think in terms of fruit bats for Encarnacion—it'd save them all that hand-pollinating. Talk to

Leo before you do anything though—he can tell you which ones will give you the best shot at viability."

In the end, Leo'd had only one problem with my mouse-eared bats and that was the way they hung when they were at rest. He was worried they'd be attacked by stickytoes. So the moment I'd stored my embryos and the rest of my gear, we went out into the woods to watch the stickytoes in action, something I hadn't done since I was a kid.

A stickytoes is about a foot long and doesn't really have sticky toes, not in the gluey sense. It has a burr-like pad on each of its feet which lets it climb like nobody's business. The best part is that the burrs are so effective, the damn thing can come down a tree head-first.

What Leo wanted me to see was the amount of damage a single stickytoes could do to the fruits of one of the local trees. The fruit wasn't human edible so the tree hadn't acquired a common name among the adults. When I was a kid, we'd called it 'critterfruit' because of the resemblance to some sort of small furry brown animal.

Having taken a fresh look, I was ready to revise that to "batfruit." I could see Leo's point. That could be a problem. I watched the stickytoes hang from the bottom of a limb to eat its way along the branch. Batfruit after batfruit vanished into the stickytoes's gullet. Those teeth were sharp enough to crack the protective shell inside the hairy covering.

"Wanna bet the tree can't propagate without a stickytoes to crack the seed open?"

"Annie, I never take that sort of bet—not with you!" Then he said, "How much of a problem is it?"

"A bit," I said. "Am I remembering correctly that stickytoes are omnivorous?"

He nodded. "You are. And they have no problem with Earth authentic meat either. Down at Loch Moose I've seen them eat mice."

"A taste for mice is altogether too close for comfort. It's not going to be easy to build up a sizable population of bats. They only have one offspring a year on the average. Ordinarily they live about twenty years but—"

"But not if the stickytoes try them and like them."

"So I'll have to make damn sure the stickytoes won't try them. Hell, if I have to hand-make my bats, I might as well go all the way. Let's head back. You can spend the afternoon telling me all the things a stickytoes wouldn't touch on a dare."

First off, we cloned the hell out of the few embryos we had—that gave us a working base and enough space to screw up one or two without causing a disaster. Then we built our bats by hand, splice by splice. It's time-consuming but no big deal.

Would have been boring as hell if Elly hadn't brought the whole troop of kids into town for a look-see. They'd gotten as worked up about bats as the team had. As long as they were around, I let Ilanith try her hand at a couple. She did just fine and couldn't have been prouder if she'd designed them herself.

"Mama Jason?" Jen came over to lean against my hip. "Are you going to let Susan make vampire bats? When *they* sprout Dragon's Teeth, the Dragon's Teeth look like *people!*"

It took us some time to sort that one out. Turned out she'd found *Dracula* in ships' files and she'd made the best sense of it she could. Which was that a vampire was a Dragon's Tooth that gave birth to blood-sucking bats and wolves and who knows what all else.

Elly, bless her many talents, made short work of straightening the kid out. I sure wouldn't have known how to field that one!

"Oh," said Jen at last. Then, turning her face up to me, she added, "It was your fault, Mama Jason. You *told* us to read fiction to learn about Earth authentic species."

"So I did," I admitted. "And you're right. I'd have thought the same as you, if somebody hadn't told me better."

"Oh," she said again. "Okay, then."

Leo caught her eye and said, " 'Okay'?"

"Sure. If Mama Jason says it could have happened to her, it's not so bad if it happened to me. When I get as old as Mama Jason, I won't get mixed up about vampires."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Not about vampires. But you'll get mixed up about something else, I guarantee. Old as Mama Jason is no magical protection."

Jen eyed me sadly. "Too bad," she said.

"Keeps me from getting bored, though. So don't feel too sorry for me."

"Right," said Jen.

"Done," said Ilanith. "What next?"

"Next we pop them into the incubators and we wait. The real work starts when we pop them out of the incubators. Raising mammals is a pain in the butt."

"*I'm* a mammal," Jen said.

"My point exactly."

That brought a giggle from her. "Well, then," she said, after a moment, "you should ask Elly. She knows all about raising mammals."

Which wasn't such a bad idea. With everybody and Aklilu contributing, we told Elly everything she hadn't already heard about bats. When we were finished, Elly gave it some serious thought.

"They need dark and they need to hang upsidedown and they need to be warm." Elly ticked the requirements off on her fingers.

"*And* they need to be fed oftener than this troop," I said, raising another of her fingers.

"You'll need help tending them, then," Elly said, nodding. "I can recommend any number of bat-sitters." She looked around her expectantly.

The kids caught on even before I did. Elly got mobbed by enthusiastic volunteers. She made sure each and every one of them knew what kind of responsibility they were taking on. When she was finished, I had extra help by the handful.

"That takes care of the feeding," Elly said, as pleased with the kids as she was with herself. "As for the warm, dark and upsidedown—how about pockets?"

"Pockets?"

"Sure. A baby bat can hang upside down *inside* your pocket, where it's warm and dark."

"Elly, you're a genius."

"No. I'm just good at raising small mammals."

So by the time we were ready to pop the baby bats out of the incubators, we had patch-pockets in all our shirts. Out of the incubator, into the pocket.

Half of Elly's kids flew home to Loch Moose Lodge with their pockets full of baby bats, all safe and warm.

There was only one problem with that but it would have been a problem wherever the baby bats were. That was the bat-shit. Yes, I know bat-shit has its very own name. Call it guano all you like, it's still bat-shit to me. And it was everywhere.

The bats survived only because they were, in Ilanith's words, "in*cred*ibly cute."

When all that cuteness took to flying, things got pretty exciting around the lab for a while—until we realized bats, even baby bats, never run into anything.

By that time, they were on solid food. We set the local kids to catching bugs for them but they'd already made some forays at hunting for themselves. Toss a bug and they'd catch it on the wing nine times out of ten.

The acid test came quite by accident. One of our bug-catchers left the door to the lab open. It was dusk, one of those beautiful clear nights. Next thing I knew we had the swarming horrors by the millions.

Mike swatted the air like crazy, trying to fend them off, cursing a steady stream at the negligence of the kid. I settled for covering my eyes—and cursing just in general. My pockets stirred and, before I could stop them, both my bats were in the air.

"Annie! My bats! Stop them!"

I blinked a dozen or more horrors out of my eyes and peered through my fingers. Mike's bats—Thorn and St. Germain—were in the air, too. What with Tomato Surprise and Sulpho, that seemed to make more than four.

I had to lower my hands to watch. I'd have dropped my jaw at the acrobatics but that would have gotten me a mouthful of the swarming horrors. As I stared, Sulpho zigged, snapped up a dozen of the horrors, zagged to snap up another dozen, then did a full somersault in mid-air for yet another mouthful.

Tomato Surprise had an even neater trick. She dove into a cluster and scooped them up with her wing. Then she flipped up her tail to eat the ones she'd netted—all without losing so much as an inch of altitude.

I got it from the swarming horrors' eyeview once, too. Thorn aimed straight for my face, teeth-first. For all of a quarter second, I thought I was about to get an explanation for the bad press bats had on Earth—then, with a flick of his wing, Thorn hung a right so sharp I could only gape. I felt a riffle of air along my temple and then all the horrors that had been buzzing around my face were gone.

Mike grabbed me by the arm. "Dammit, Annie—what if they get poisoned?"

"If eating swarming horrors kills 'em," I said, "we have to start over. We might as well find out now."

He sighed. "Yeah, but. . . ."

"How many times do I have to remind you not to make pets of the laboratory animals?"

"Don't get snotty. You named yours first. And you look just like I feel."

"Yeah," I admitted, "but it's too late now and if they've got such an instinct for eating swarming horrors, you know as well as I do they're gonna eat 'em sooner or later."

In this case, it was sooner. They'd settled into a routine now, all four making graceful sweeps of the lab. With each pass the number of swarming horrors lessened. Now *that's* what I call efficient!

They made unbelievably short work of the swarming horrors. Some fifteen minutes later, my bats landed on my shoulder and climbed back into their pocket, twice as fat as when they'd left it. I could have sworn I heard Tomato Surprise belch contentedly.

It was a week before Mike and I were willing to admit the bats had come to no harm. Then we did everything short of jumping up and down to celebrate. Jumping up and down would have disturbed the bats at their sleep, you see.

Later that week, Susan went back to Ashok for another set of embryo samples to start the cloning of a second batch.

Came time to release the first batch of bats, we decided to make a ceremony of it, which was nice because—for once—that fit in so well with my own plans. The first batch went to Loch Moose, and never mind how many guilds screamed. The mosquitoes were still on my mind. Besides, Elly and the kids had had as much of a hand in raising the babies as my team had.

So every last one of us trooped up to Loch Moose, our pockets full of bats.

First thing we got was a tour of the lodge's attic—Elly'd enlisted the neighbors, they'd raised the roof two feet, put in a couple of bat-sized openings and covered the floor of the crawl-space with a tarp. "According to Ilanith, bat guano is great for gardens. We thought we'd better find a way to, uh, harvest it once we get them moved in."

I eyed Ilanith. "As long as you keep an eye on the vegetables to make sure the change in the EC doesn't change *them.*"

"Will do, Mama Jason," said Ilanith, snapping me a nod.

The kids had been making bat boxes to hang in the trees as well, just in case the bats preferred to leave "home." I could see where this had gotten to be a major project. And I *never* turn down volunteer assistance.

We had one helluva dinner, then we went out on the porch and settled in to wait for nightfall.

"Or the swarming horrors, whichever comes first," Ilanith said. "Aklilu left the door open one night and a bunch of them got in—but the bats made short work of 'em."

Aklilu made chomping movements with his hands to demonstrate.

There was a stirring in my right pocket. Tomato Surprise climbed to my shoulder, seemed to test the air, and clung there for a moment.

Jen, who was sitting on my lap, said authoritatively, "He's clicking it out." Aklilu stopped 'chomping' and nodded. To me, Jen said, "I can hear 'em sometimes. Aklilu, too."

This time Elly nodded. "The younger kids are more likely to be able to hear them. Glen Sonics Dollery got curious enough to check it out with an oscilloscope. The bat's lowest calls are just at the upper range of Jen's and Aklilu's hearing."

"I'm sorry I'm missing it," I said to Jen.

She gave my hand a squeeze. "Me, too. I like the way it sounds. It means he's checking everything out. . . ." She cocked her head a moment. "Now he's gonna launch."

And with that he did. Moments later, Sulpho and the rest of the bats did the same sort of routine. Jen and Aklilu giggled. Soft fluttering filled the air around us.

The bats were on their own at last. Now it was only a matter of wait and see if they'd survive—and if they'd thrive. We'd done the best we could to give them a Mirabilan twist. Now it was up to the bats themselves.

"All gone!" said Aklilu happily. "Raise more bats, Mama Jason?"

"You betcha," I told him. "Susan's incubating them now. You wait a few weeks, you'll have a new bat to feed."

"Good," said Elly. "I was a little worried what would happen when their pets left home."

"Were you, Elly?" Ilanith stood up suddenly. "If I'd known, I'd have told you—No, watch." She held out her index finger and made a sort of chirping sound. She waited patiently for a moment, then chirped again.

"She's coming," Aklilu announced.

Next thing I knew, Ilanith had a bat clinging to her forefinger. She offered it a grub which it ate with relish—then it launched back into the air and vanished again.

Mike said, "Now why didn't *I* think of that?"

"Some people just aren't as bright as others," Susan told him, with a wink at Ilanith.

"Don't fight!" said Ilanith. "I can show you how, Mike. It's easy! They're bright—you can teach 'em all sorts of things."

Jen giggled. "You be careful if you teach it 'sic 'em' though. Ilanith did and didn't have a grub ready so it chomped her finger instead."

"I didn't hear about that little incident," Elly said, her mother-tones ominous.

"Oops," said Jen.

Ilanith spread her hands. "Don't worry about it, Jen. We'd have had to warn Mike and he'd have told Mama Jason and she'd have told Elly anyhow."

"Dead on right," I said. I cocked a finger at Ilanith, though, and said, "Next time, I want to hear about it on the spot. When we're gearing up for the release of something, we need to know all their behavior patterns."

"But, Mama Jason," Ilanith's voice took on that exasperated-with-adults tone, "it was *my fault* it bit me."

"Have I suddenly lost all my wits? What on earth made you think I wouldn't take that into account?"

Ilanith found something terribly interesting around her feet that needed close observation. "Sorry," she mumbled, just about as audible as bat clicks. "I *didn't* think." Then a bit louder. "I didn't mean to insult you."

"No offense taken, so long as it doesn't happen again." I hoisted Jen into my arms and stood up to stretch my back. "Now, if you'll all follow me, I've got a bit of a ceremony to perform."

If I'd meant to take my time ambling back into the lodge, I lost that notion quick. The level of curiosity led to a jostling which led to minor pushing which led to a stampede into the dining room. Chie-hoon, the only one who knew what this was about, grinned at me. I put Jen down to let her join the mad race. And took my time getting there so I could make an entrance.

Nothing like an attentive audience to put you on your best behavior, I thought. Damned if I knew what they *expected* me to do. . . . Took a minute to find Leo in all that crowd. Chie-hoon grabbed his elbow and thrust him to the fore, rearranging some of the smaller kids so they could still see.

I made Leo my deepest bow and said, "Leonov Bellmaker Denness—I, Ann Jason Masmajean, beg you to hear my petition. . . ."

It brought the house down. Elly outright whooped, then dropped to one knee to explain to Aklilu, "That means she finally thought of a courting gift for Noisy."

"About time, too!" commented Susan.

"So hush up and let her finish," said Leo—which brought instant quiet. He made me a return bow to get the ritual back on track.

"I have brought you a gift in symbol of my intentions," I went on.

Another exchange of bows. Leo was pulling out all the stops. He did it with such flair that Aklilu had to try it, too. Aklilu fell over, giggled, got up to try again, and the second time succeeded. I think I managed to keep my face straight; Leo didn't.

By the time I was half-way through my list of reasons for loving Leo, ritual got shot to hell. There I was on: "Because you're the only person I've ever met with hands as big as mine" and "Because you volunteered to carry baby bats in your pockets—" and the kids started calling out suggestions. . . .

"Because he can shout louder than anybody in the *world,*" suggested Jen.

The hell with ritual. "Because you can shout as loud as I can," I told Leo.

"Stories!" said Aklilu. "Because he tells the best stories!"

"Because you tell the best stories," I echoed. Sometimes it's hard to talk when you're grinning that hard.

"Because he gene-reads his own pansies," Susan contributed.

"Who's proposing to this man, you or me?" I said, at last. Took me a minute to catch my breath but while I did, they settled down to a dull roar.

"Because I like necking with you better than any other sport known on Mirabile *or* on Earth and because you can reasonably out-stubborn me any day," I said, "I hope you will accept my gift and consider my suit."

We went through another round of bows and Leo said, "Ann Jason

Masmajean, I, Leonov Bellmaker Denness am sufficiently intrigued to view your gift."

A cheer went up, followed by shouts of "What is it?" and "Let's see!" and "*Where* is it?" I had to wave them into silence. "It's not a thing you can put in a pocket," I said to Aklilu, who was patting at my hip in an exploratory fashion.

"It's this, Leo: I'm offering to take you on as my apprentice."

Leo's jaw dropped practically to his chest. For one horrible moment I thought I'd gotten it wrong, then he said, "Me? You'd let me be a jason?"

"Only if you want. We could use you, Leo. You've got expertise we haven't."

He eyed me suspiciously. "You're serious?"

Helluva thing to ask. "As serious as your kangaroo rex courting gift was," I said. "I need somebody to specialize in Mirabilan wildlife. I've got the funds for it—ask Chie-hoon if you doubt me!—all I need is the body."

Leo spread his arms wide. "This body is all yours."

That was a load off my mind. I stepped into his embrace. Behind me, I heard Susan say, "Yup. She got it right," and I heard Elly's answering chuckle.

Not everything works out as neatly as you'd like—at least, bats don't. We took the second batch to RightHere but it was Bethany we took them to, in private.

"You've got a choice to make," I told her. "You can have Leo's bell or you can have the bats. You can't have both in your belfry."

It was Ilanith who'd discovered it—in her supplementary reading. Despite the guild's enthusiasm, "bats in the belfry" was not, by Earth authentic standards, a particularly good thing. It certainly wasn't the compliment they'd taken it for. Bats are associated with *disused* belfries only. Good reason for that: Leo's bell would deafen the poor things and next thing you know they'd be flying into walls.

"Why are you asking me?" she said. "Seems to me the whole guild—"

"You're the artist," I said. "A flock of real bats would, for one thing, cover up the bats you carved into the belfry's ceiling. If the choice were mine, I'd suggest you build batboxes all around the town and leave the bell where it is."

Leo raised an eyebrow at me. "If they're so set on the bats, the bell can just as well come down. Or we could take the clapper out." To Bethany, he added, "I can't make out whether she's more interested in saving my bell or your carvings. Probably both, if I know her."

He took my hands in his. "Let's get the priorities straight. We *need* the bats. We don't need the bell."

"Or the carvings," Bethany put in. "I'll put it to the guilds, Annie, but I can tell you right now what the decision will be: bats in the belfry."

She was right. The only thing that made me feel better about it was that they moved Leo's bell—right to the middle of the town square. There, at least, everybody could—and did—appreciate the work Leo'd put into the design. Leo seemed pleased by it all.

Then we saw the second round of bats settled in their new home. I was still sorry they covered Bethany's carvings.

Bethany had the damnedest expression on her face, though, as if she might break into giggles at any moment. Half an hour later, once we'd gotten away from the guild, she leaned close and said, "Annie, what the hell kind of bats are those? I thought you were bringing us mouse-eared bats."

I hadn't expected that from anybody but another jason. As dead-pan as I could, I said, "Red bats and yellow bats."

"Right," she said, and then she *did* burst into laughter. "You can't con me, Annie—I did my research for the bat carvings. Red bats are brown. Yellow bats are brown. *These* red bats are poppy red and *these* yellow bats are dandelion yellow. And I won't even bring up the *pumpkin orange* bats."

Not bringing up "pumpkin orange" set her to laughing all over again.

When it simmered down a bit, I said, "I had to do *something* to make them look unappetizing to the stickytoes."

"Oh!" Bethany's eyes lit up. "I get it. Nothing in its right mind would mess with a killquick, so you made them killquick colors."

I nodded. "I won't tell if you won't. Other than that, they're Earth authentic."

Leo put an arm around my shoulders. "They're not Earth authentic. They're Mirabilan—like Bethany's cathedral."

"Lord, Annie, I won't say a word," said Bethany. "They really brighten up the belfry. All that grey stone was a little grim before we moved the bats in. I think your Mirabilan bats are a work of art!"

Better than that, I couldn't ask for.

Sabah managed to keep his mouth shut too, even though it took some effort. With only a hint of a smile, he (and the rest of his team) admired our Mirabilan bats and stuck to the term despite an occasional outburst of chuckles.

It was Vassily who named them, though. He stared up at the clusters of bats hanging from his mother's carvings and said, "Oh, wow! Tulip bats!" and from then on nobody called them anything but.

And Leo and I got the privilege of being the first couple to join hands in the new cathedral. So much to-do was made about it that it took us three days at Leo's cabin out on Loch Moose to recuperate. Elly restricted the kids to the other side of the lake for the duration, bless her, and there was nary a crisis to interfere with our pleasure, though we both suspected that the team had strict instructions *not* to call us even if there was one.

We were out on the loch at dusk, snuggled together at one end of Leo's boat, breathing in the night air and simply appreciating the sounds around us in the flickering shadows made by the nova-light. And watching the lightning bugs twinkle.

The lightning bugs had been our wedding gift from the team—they'd worked like dogs, and all in secret, too, to have some fifty of them to release the night we arrived at Leo's. Sweetest present.

"There's one," said Leo and lifted a hand to point it out to me. The lightning bug blinked closer and closer to the boat in its characteristic erratic flight pattern. Real pretty—just like the descriptions I'd read in ships' records. That was just about all it took to make Loch Moose perfect, as far as I was concerned.

Then I heard a soft flutter of wings, felt a rush of air ruffle my hair and the lightning bug was gone. I sat up, rocking the boat.

"Annie? What—?"

"Damn bat!" I said. "A damn bat ate our lightning bug!"

Leo started to laugh. "You are never satisfied. You wanted something that would eat insects—you got something that would eat insects!"

Well, it *was* funny when he put it that way. I couldn't help but laugh along with him. But—"As for never satisfied, you're wrong about that!" And then to clarify my meaning I kissed him—a lot. Let the damn bats eat the damn lightning bugs. . . . Leo and I had better things to do than worry about the wildlife. ●

SUDDENLY

She was a writer
and so,
somehow,
expected foreshadowing.
—"Of *course* we have enough air to make it to the base . . ."
—"The Count generally sleeps by day . . ."
—"Wherever you go, whatever you do, *don't open that door* . . ."
But when it came,
she didn't even have time
to think
that it wasn't fair.

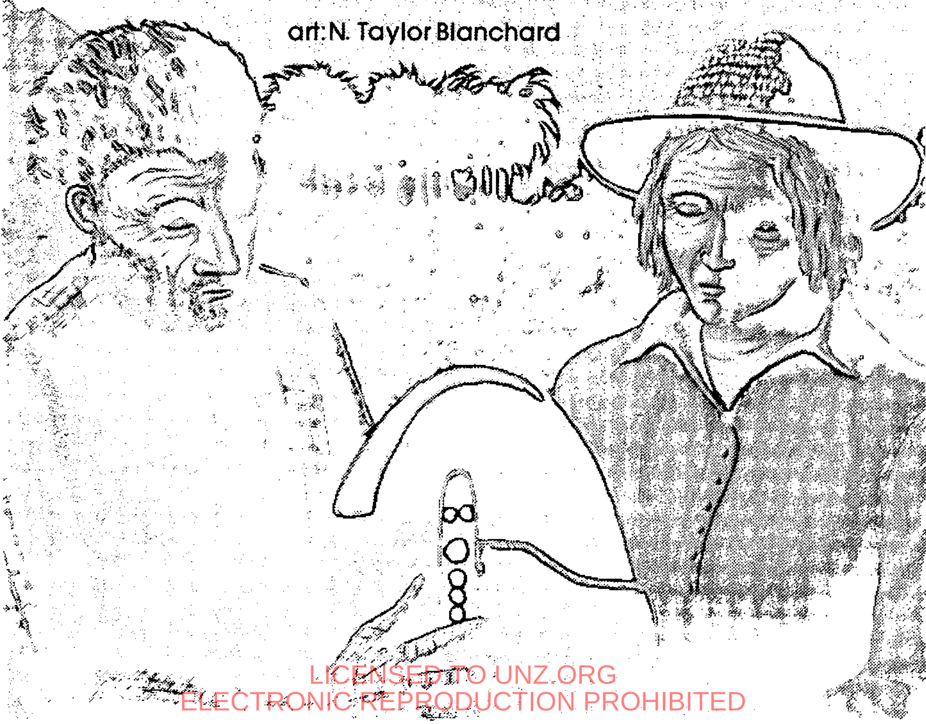
—Vivian Vande Velde

LIZ AND DIEGO

by Richard Paul Russo

Richard Paul Russo's second novel,
Subterranean Gallery (Tor Books, 1990),
recently won the Philip K. Dick Award.
Mr. Russo tells us he is now working on a new
novel, but we selfishly hope he will
still find the time to fashion more
of his powerful short pieces.

art: N. Taylor Blanchard



Liz walked miles every day—among the dense trees of the nearby jungle, along the river, through the hot mazes of streets and buildings that made up the town. Her short, thick hair was almost completely grey, and she would be sixty-six next month, but she was in good shape despite the heart attack three years before and the smoking she could not quit. What she did was walk, in the mornings and early evenings when the air was cooler, hoping someday she would find a place or a state of mind that would allow her to be happy again. Until then, the walking kept her alive, and kept her sane.

Liz sat at a sidewalk cafe table, tall plants threatening to engulf her from behind and above, and slowly smoked a cigarette. It was late afternoon, and the breeze drifting among the tables was warm and humid.

Liz finished her coffee, signaled the waiter for a refill. She wore lightweight, tan cotton pants, a bone-colored shirt, and dusty brown walking shoes. It had been years since she'd worn a dress, and what she wore (among other things) made her stand out in this town; here, all the women wore skirts or dresses. Liz knew what the people thought of her, but it didn't matter.

A young girl, black hair flying, came running down the street, headed for the cafe. She was barefoot, wearing a light brown dress, and dodged through the pedestrians and the few cars driving slowly along the dusty road, then made her way through the sidewalk tables to Liz's side. The girl stopped, staring at Liz.

"El Diego necesita verla a usted," the girl said, trying not to laugh. Diego needs to see you.

Liz nodded, sighed heavily. *"Pues, sí."*

The girl ran off without looking back. Liz put out her cigarette, put money on the table. She sat for a minute without moving, gazing across the street without really seeing anything. Then she stood, put on her straw hat, and started walking down the street toward the river.

Just outside of town, Liz left the road, started down a wide path through the trees. The heat increased, closed in on her, but the warm, damp air felt clean in her lungs. Samuelson, her doctor, wanted her to move somewhere else, where the air was dry. Back to the States, he'd suggested, where it would be easier for him to see her. Some godawful place like Arizona. But then, he also wanted her to quit smoking. Liz stayed here instead, willing to take her chances with the smoking and the damp heat.

Liz came out of the trees at the edge of the river, into cooler, fresher air that caught her breath for a moment. She stood on a large rock jutting out over the river, breathing deeply and watching the water flow past beneath her, tumbling over moss-covered stones, pouring through deep trenches. Then she stepped back and down onto rough gravel, and started upstream toward Diego's place.

Liz had been living here nearly three years now, and in that time, she knew, most of the people in the town had seen the scars across her wrist, but no one had ever asked her about them. Except Diego. The first time they'd met he had looked at her wrist, then up at her face, and said, "Why the *hell* did a woman like you try to kill herself?" That was before the old Italian went blind. Now, sometimes, when they were alone together, he would take her hand in his and lightly brush his fingers along the scars, shaking his head and sighing.

When she came around the final bend, bringing Diego's hut into view, she saw smoke rising from the metal stove chimney. Mata must be in, cleaning up and cooking for him. The hut looked ramshackle, built of stone, wood, sections of sheet metal and aluminum siding, blocks of concrete and brick. But it was much more solid than it appeared, Liz knew, and would probably outlast half the buildings in town.

She called out as she approached the open doorway, and stepped inside expecting to see Mata at the stove. But Diego was alone, sitting on a tree stump in front of the big old stove, a piece of wood in his hand. The stove door was open, and he gazed into the flames with his sightless eyes.

"Hello, Liz," he said.

"You're going to burn this whole place down someday you keep building fires when you're alone."

The old Italian shrugged, said nothing. Liz sat in one of the metal and plastic folding chairs several feet from the stove, away from the heat of the fire. There was several days' growth of black and grey stubble on Diego's face, and she knew he had been out in the jungle on one of his "treasure hunts," as he called them. She lit a cigarette, handed it to Diego, then lit another for herself.

"You wanted to see me," Liz said.

Diego turned toward her, widened his white-fogged eyes. "Never again, Liz." Then he nodded, grinned. "I've found more stuff that goes with the helmet," Diego said.

"You sure?"

Diego nodded. "I'm sure. Couldn't really tell what it all was, couldn't bring much of it back. So I need you to go back out there with me, see exactly what it all is."

"How *far* out there?" She had been on a couple of his expeditions when they didn't get back until after dark, and she knew he often went a lot further.

"We can go part way by boat, up the river. A day on the water, another day on foot, I don't know how long we'll need to stay there . . ."

"Diego, you're out of your mind. You expect me to spend several days out in the jungle? I'm an old woman, remember?"

"Yeah, and I'm an old man. Christ, you're in better shape than I am."

It was true. Still, spending hours walking was not the same as trekking through the jungle, and at night she always had her room to return to, running water and electricity, a comfortable bed.

"Wait a minute," Diego said. "I'll show you what I *did* bring back." He jammed the stick of wood into the stove, got up and walked into the back room. When he returned a few minutes later, he was wearing the shiny black helmet, and carrying a dark meshed bundle over his arm.

It was the helmet that had blinded him, but it was also the helmet that now allowed him to somehow sense his surroundings, to "see" so he could go out into the jungle on his own and make his way without running into objects or even getting lost, though it gave him intense headaches when he wore it for long periods. It was a strange sight, one she had seen several times—Diego in his hiking boots and ragged khaki clothes, wearing the shiny black helmet, picking his way among the trees. Even the visor was black and shiny; Liz could never see through it to Diego's face, and she doubted if anyone, at least another human, could have seen *out* through it.

Diego unfolded the mesh bundle, which was in the general shape of a sleeveless vest with a stiff banded collar at the neck, then put his arms through the side gaps. "Watch this," he said. He pressed the front opening closed, and the vest was far too large for him. But then he snapped the banded collar shut, and suddenly the vest began to contract. Silently, without bunching, the vest compressed and tightened to mold itself to Diego's body, shoulders, and neck.

That was basically what the helmet had done when he had first put it over his head, Diego had told her weeks before—interior padding had expanded to mold itself to his head so the helmet, at first too large, became a perfect fit. But then, unable to see through the darkened visor, Diego had touched the largest of several silver depressions on the side of the helmet; an explosion of sorts had gone off inside it, and inside his head. When he had removed the helmet, he was blind.

"The vest definitely goes with the helmet," Diego said. "Like this, sealing at the neck." He brought the helmet and vest collars together, they clicked shut, and suddenly part of Diego was gone.

The helmet and vest, and the parts of Diego's body they enclosed, disappeared entirely, his arms apparently dangling in mid-air.

"Diego!" Liz called.

"What?" His voice came from where his head had been, from where, presumably, his head still was, though she could no longer see it.

Then Liz realized what it was—instant camouflage, the helmet and vest high-tech chameleons, so good they were able to create the perspective of the surroundings into which they blended. The wall behind Diego had been replicated across the surface of the vest and helmet, and only when she stared closely at it could she see the blurring at the edges, the slight inconsistencies. She stepped forward, reached out and touched his chest.

"It's awfully good," she said.

"What, for Christ's sake?"

"You've disappeared."

"*What?* "

Liz explained to him what she was seeing, and what she wasn't seeing.

"So that's what it is," Diego said. "There's something like a hum when I connect the two. I don't exactly hear it, I just feel it, real soft in my chest and head. I couldn't figure out what it was."

"It's pretty incredible."

"Well?" Diego asked.

Liz stared at the arms hanging in space, at the legs and waist standing without trunk or head. It seemed to her then that this might be what she had been looking for—it brought out a sense of excitement and energy. She nodded. Then, remembering he could not see her (but wondering if he could sense her nodding), she said, "Yes, Diego, I'll go with you."

They started upriver at dawn the next day in a narrow boat that rode high on the water and was powered by a quiet prop motor. A light, warm mist rose from the water, drifted across it, broke apart as the boat pushed through. Diego, wearing the helmet, handled the motor and guided them upstream without any direction from Liz. She wondered what it was he "saw" with the helmet, wondered how he could pilot the boat, blind, better than she could have with full sight. He skirted rocks with ease, negotiated twisting channels, and avoided branches and other debris floating down the river, often making adjustments long before Liz saw that they needed to do so.

On the banks and half hidden by dense foliage, or underwater and obscured by the silt and flow of the river, were the remnants of all the years of armed conflict—the stripped, empty husk of a crushed helicopter; enormous rusting wheels; rotting wood and melted plastic; chunks of jagged metal no longer recognizable. Though there had been no fighting in the area in more than two years, the periodic, almost regular battles and skirmishes over the last several decades had littered the jungle with the detritus of war. Diego made his living from it as a scavenger.

The day grew hot, and Liz sat in the bow with eyes half closed, her face protected from direct sunlight by her straw hat. The damp heat and the quiet shushing of the water and the purr of the motor all suffused her with a peaceful, relaxing lethargy, and she almost wished she could do this, or something like it, for the rest of her life.

Shortly after mid-day, they stopped at a deserted, cratered village of rotting huts. While Diego built a fire to cook their lunch and make coffee, removing the helmet to ease the headaches, Liz wandered through the village. She made her way among blackened craters, partially burned rubble, huts now beyond repair. The air was still and quiet; even the buzz of insects and the cries of birds and animals were muted, barely audible. She half expected to stumble across a burned or decaying corpse. The village made her think of Zeke.

Back at the fire, Diego gave her a plate of fried polenta and a cup of coffee, and she sat on a rock beside him.

"Remember Vietnam?" she asked.

Diego grunted. "Couldn't hardly forget."

"Some people have." She paused. "Were you there?"

"Yeah."

She waited for him to say more, but when he didn't she said, "So was my brother, Zeke."

"Did he come back?"

She nodded. "Yes. But he came back with most of his left foot blown off. And he came back a junkie. Three years later he got shot in the head trying to break into the apartment of some drug dealer. In sunny Oakland, California."

Diego breathed deeply. "Sorry to hear it."

Liz nodded again, this time to herself. "When it happened, my husband said Zeke got just what he deserved. We'd been married about a year, and I should have known then to leave the son of a bitch. Would have saved myself a lot of grief." Liz sighed, then shrugged. "But I didn't."

"And here you are," Diego said.

She smiled. "Yeah, and here I am."

Night fell quickly over the river, but Diego said it didn't matter, he could see just fine. The stars came out, glittering brightly, and before long the moon, waxing and over half full, began to rise above the tree tops. The river, mostly dark, became irregularly patterned with shifting silver reflections.

Diego put the boat in at a short, narrow strip of beach, and they pulled it up out of the water. Together they set up the tent, then Diego, head in a lot of pain now, removed the helmet and lay inside while Liz started a fire and put on a pot of stew. As the stew cooked, she smoked a cigarette and sat back against a tree, relaxed and content, listening to the night sounds of the jungle around her.

When the stew was just about done, Diego emerged from the tent and staggered toward the fire. Liz guided him onto a seat of stones, then gave him a full plate of stew. Diego ate quickly, stuffing chunks of meat and vegetables into his mouth as fast as he could swallow.

"Damn thing doesn't just give me headaches, makes me hungry as all hell," he said between platefuls.

"How are you feeling now?" Liz asked.

"Better. Pain's almost gone. By morning . . ." He shrugged, resumed eating.

Diego drank two cups of wine while they ate, and several more afterwards. He'd brought several bottles, which surprised Liz, since she hadn't known him to drink much. When the fire was out and they went into the tent and crawled into their sleeping bags, she could smell the wine in the closed-in air. She wondered if he would snore.

"You ever think about going to bed with me?" Diego asked.

Liz wanted to laugh, but she didn't, afraid Diego would misunderstand. "No," she eventually said.

Diego grunted, then said, "I think about it." He paused. "You know what some of the people in town think you are?"

"What's that?" she asked, knowing.

"Dyke."

This time she did laugh, quietly. "No. I just lost interest a few years ago."

"It was that husband of yours, wasn't it? The one you should have left."

"Partially."

"He still alive?"

"Yes." She stared up at the tent ceiling, wishing Diego would fall asleep or pass out.

"What did he do?" Diego asked.

Liz hesitated. She knew Diego would misunderstand, would imagine something simplistic—that Frederick had beaten her, for example, or had raped her, something like that. Of course it wasn't that simple, but she didn't have the desire or the energy to try to explain, at least not tonight. So she said, "Good night, Diego," and then nothing more.

The old Italian was silent for a minute, then he grunted again, and she heard him turn over, face away from her. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

The next day they traveled on foot. By noon, despite a slow pace, Liz was tired, but Diego had been right—she was in better shape than he was. She could hear his labored breathing emerge in hisses from the helmet, and he needed to rest frequently, which was fine by her.

They stopped briefly to eat some wild fruit, then resumed hiking. The trek through the jungle, though tiring, brought Liz a sense of peace and contentment. She felt she had at last crossed the barrier from her old world, her past, and had crossed into a new and different world, an unknown but freer future.

Sometime in the late afternoon it rained, drenching them for half an hour, then ceasing abruptly. The clouds vanished, and the sun blazed down on the jungle, bringing up a steamy heat from the dense vegetation. A shifting cloud of brightly colored butterflies swept over them in a nearly silent flutter of hundreds of wings. Birds and animals cried out and screeched on all sides.

Then, before long, the sun was nearly gone, so low it was no longer even indirectly visible in the leaves high above them, and darkness began to fall.

"Not far now," Diego said. He sounded exhausted, and in great pain. Liz wanted to help him, somehow, but knew she couldn't.

They climbed over a low stand of large, lichen-covered stones, and came out on the edge of a bowl-shaped clearing carpeted by low ferns and thick mosses and patches of crumbled, blackened stone. On the far side of the clearing, Liz could make out the remains of a fire pit, and several feet away from it, at the border between the clearing and the dense jungle, barely visible in the growing darkness, was a large, round disk on a low mound of earth.

"You see it?" Diego asked.

Liz nodded, then said, "Yes, something. It's getting dark."

Diego led the way across the clearing, directly to the thick metal disk, which was about three feet in diameter. He pulled it back, which revealed an opening into darkness. The metal around the rim of the opening was torn and jagged, as if something had blown its way out. Inside was complete darkness, but Liz had the impression the opening led into a metal structure buried in the earth.

"What is it?" Liz asked.

"I don't know," Diego said. "Spaceship?"

"The helmet, the vest, you don't suppose we have technology like that, do you?"

"This damn helmet wasn't made for human beings, that's all I know." With that, Diego pulled the helmet off his head and sank to his hands and knees. "Explore tomorrow," he said. "Daylight. I can't do a damn thing right now." He dropped the helmet and held his head in his hands, pressing palms into temples. Liz replaced the disk over the opening, then helped Diego to his feet.

This time Liz put up the tent alone, helped Diego into it, poured some wine for him. Now she understood why he had brought so much along. She hadn't realized how debilitating the headaches could be.

While Diego rested, Liz finished making camp. She strung a large, slanting tarp over the fire pit, built a fire, then put another stew on to cook. While the stew simmered, she collected firewood, and stones and wood and branches to construct two makeshift seats in front of the fire. Following Diego's directions and using one of the flashlights, she found a small stream just a few yards from the camp, and refilled their canteens.

When she returned from the last trip to the stream, Diego was up, sitting in front of the fire, gazing into it. Liz wondered what it was he could see or sense in the flames with those sightless eyes. Maybe the warmth eased his pain.

They ate in silence, the smoke from the fire rising and slipping upward along the slanting tarp, escaping at the higher end while water dripped slowly but steadily from the lower. When the food was gone, Diego brought out the red wine, and Liz joined him. She added wood to the fire, and they sat watching it, smoking cigarettes and drinking wine.

"Why did you try to kill yourself?" Diego asked.

Liz didn't respond at first. The question didn't surprise her—she'd been expecting it since they'd started out the day before—but she still hadn't decided how she would answer. Ever since that first time he'd asked, almost three years before, she'd known the day would come when she would tell him the story. She supposed that this was it.

Of course there was no way to really tell the story as it had all happened, the way things had affected her, and what she had thought, especially since she still didn't understand it completely herself. All she could do was give him the outlines, and hope it would be enough for him to understand.

"One day," she started. And then she stopped, almost began to laugh.

"This a funny story?" Diego asked.

Liz shook her head. "No. I don't know why I want to laugh, but I do. Maybe because it's all so absurd." She put out her cigarette, lit a fresh one, then resumed.

"One day I came into the house, and found my husband in bed with another woman. Only the other woman was my daughter."

She paused, and Diego said, "Your daughter?"

"My daughter. Not a typical incest situation, though, since she was in her thirties, married, had two daughters of her own, and was very willing." She paused again, her gaze on the fire, though unfocused. "And it was not a new thing. Apparently it had been going on for years, since before she was married, though they both said never while she was living at home. Not that it matters." She shook her head to herself. "All those years, my husband, my daughter. I felt like a fool, a blind fool, that I hadn't been able to see it in all that time, all those years it had been going on. I couldn't believe I hadn't known, that I hadn't a clue." She dragged on the cigarette, held the smoke a long time before releasing it. "And then it got stranger, or at least *I* thought so. They told me they had no intention of stopping, they were going to keep on sleeping together, and if I didn't like it, well, it was too damn bad." She shook her head again. "I tried to get them into counseling, all of us together, or the two of them, or individually, at least that, but there was no way they'd agree to it. Finally, they told me to piss off, and so the only one who tried getting any counseling was me."

There was a long pause, then Diego said, "So you tried suicide."

Liz shook her head. "No. I had a heart attack. Wasn't that bad, I suppose, didn't really come close to killing me. I spent three days in the hospital. Three days of lying there, alone, thinking. Three days, and they let me out. *Then* I tried. As soon as I got home, I went into the kitchen and slashed my wrist. Frederick found me, got the paramedics out in time, and I was back in the hospital."

Liz tossed the cigarette butt into the fire, and sipped at her wine. She started to get another cigarette, then changed her mind.

"First few days, I was kind of numb. Stunned, I guess, that I was still alive, not too sure how I felt about that. Eventually, though, I was glad I hadn't been successful. But I knew I had to get out. Out of my life, out of that world, since it seemed to me I certainly didn't belong. I couldn't see how it worked any more. I had lost touch somehow. So I came here."

She turned and looked at Diego, who was directly facing her, eyes locked on hers as if he could see her.

"And are you happy here?" he asked.

She thought about it a minute, then said, "I'm not *un*happy."

Diego nodded, turned back to the fire, and didn't say another word.

In the grey, early morning light, Liz and Diego stood before the opening. The helmet lay at Diego's feet; the headaches had not completely faded, and he wasn't going to use it unless absolutely necessary.

Liz knelt at the edge of the opening and peered inside. She could see a little, now, but mostly shadows and indistinct reflections from dark metal.

"I really don't know what the hell it's like inside," Diego said. "I went in wearing the helmet, but I might as well have been blind, the damn thing didn't seem to work right in there."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard to explain, the way I 'see' with the helmet. I sense what's all around me, somehow, by getting . . . Christ, I don't know, lines or something, some kind of input that *means* something to me, enough so that somehow I can interpret and understand what's around me, creating pictures in my head. But when I went inside, all that input, it didn't stop, but it became gibberish, it didn't mean a thing. Well, it wasn't *all* gibberish, I could sense spaces, when I was in a corridor or a room, the general outlines so I could move through it. But as for what's actually inside? The vest was; I found that by feel and just took it. And there's another helmet somewhere, but other than that . . ." He shrugged. "That's why I needed you."

"How nice to feel wanted," Liz said, smiling. "I assume, then, that I'm going in there by myself."

Diego shifted his feet, shrugged again. "Yeah, I figured. I'm useless in there."

Liz nodded. "All right."

Just inside the opening was a short, narrow ridged shaft angling down at about forty-five degrees and leading to a room or chamber of some sort. With two large flashlights strapped to her hips, Liz went through feet first, careful to avoid the sharp metal at the edges of the opening. She worked her way along the shaft, then lowered herself to the floor of the chamber.

Liz felt slightly disoriented and unbalanced for a moment; the darkness was nearly total, and the chamber floor was tilted slightly. She unstrapped one of the flashlights, and turned it on, directing it at the wall in front of her.

The wall was almost featureless, a smooth, dark grey metal broken regularly by thin, uniform vertical fissures. She played the beam across the entire wall, but there was nothing else. The adjacent wall was much the same, though about a foot or two above her head there were several highly reflective horizontal strips of some material that didn't quite look like metal, though she couldn't imagine what else it could be. The next wall was like the first, and the fourth wall was divided by a wide passage leading further into the structure. Liz started through it.

She came into a larger room, the floor littered with loose, mostly unrecognizable objects. There were clumps of fabric dotted with metal lozenges, long hollow tubes, several clear globes, and one globe that was opaque, with interior clouds that seemed to swirl as the flashlight beam moved across it. A single helmet like Diego's rested at her feet. Bolted into one wall was what looked like a thickly padded lounge chair, and above it were several more reflective horizontal strips like those in the first room.

Liz moved carefully through the room to the passage at the far end, through it, and into a third room smaller even than the first. One wall was covered with depressions and sockets and hundreds of tiny, needle-like projections. The other walls were blank.

She went through one more passage, then entered a cylindrical room with several open panels revealing storage lockers filled with more hollow tubes and clear globes. One, at the far end, held several helmets like Diego's, several vests, and several sets of what she decided must be the other attachments that completed full suits of some kind. This, she realized, was what Diego really wanted. She tried to remove them, but most were attached to the interior walls, and she couldn't free them. After several minutes, she managed to work loose another vest, one larger piece, and two smaller pieces. She set them together on the floor, then went on.

Liz didn't get far. At the far end of the cylindrical room was an L-shaped passage that ended abruptly at a ridged wall. She tried pressing on the ridges, then against the walls on both sides, but nothing she did created any kind of opening.

She returned to the cylindrical room, picked up the larger new suit section, and carried it through the rooms and passages to the foot of the shaft leading back out into the jungle. She thought of calling to Diego, who wasn't visible through the shaft opening, but decided to bring the rest of the suit sections first.

It took her two more trips, one for the two smaller suit sections and one for the helmet and vest. There was still no sign of Diego, so she called out his name. A few moments later his face appeared in the opening.

"You all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine. I've got some things you might want to look at. If you reach in, I think I can push them up far enough."

Diego knelt in front of the opening, then reached into the shaft. Liz picked up the helmet, pushed it up through the shaft until she felt Diego take hold of it.

"Another goddamn helmet," he said. "What do I want this for?"

"There's more," Liz said.

One by one she handed him the rest of the suit sections, then crawled up the shaft, through the opening, and back into fresh air and sunlight. The brightness of the morning light hurt her eyes, and she realized she was tired. She sat on a soft patch of moss beside the pile of objects she'd retrieved.

"More that goes with the helmet?" Diego asked. He was holding the largest suit section, running his fingers over it. It was made of the same dark mesh material as the vest, and looked as if it connected to the bottom of the vest, but there were no divisions for legs.

"I think so," Liz said. "These two seem to be arm sections." She handed the two smaller sections to Diego. They were fairly wide so that they looked more appropriate for wings than for arms.

Diego remained kneeling for a minute amidst the suit sections, running his hands over them. Liz thought she could smell wine again; when she looked around she saw an empty bottle a few feet away, and realized that he had been drinking while she'd been inside the buried structure.

Diego mumbled something, then put on the original vest. He closed it up, snapped the collar shut, and it compressed, molding itself to his body. When it stopped, he worked his right arm into one of the limb sections, attached it to the side of the vest. The attachment, like the vest, began to constrict. First, the end formed around Diego's hand and fingers, like a skin-tight glove, then compressed around his arm while forming a web-like flap from his elbow to his waist. Then he worked his left arm into the other limb section, and the process repeated. Diego waved the web flaps under his arms.

"Like a damn flying lizard," he said. "I told you this stuff wasn't made for people." He picked up the large final section, which was shaped more like a sack than anything else. "Might as well go all the way," he said. "You going to help?"

Liz stood and went to his side, supported Diego as he climbed into the mesh sack, worked the rim up around his waist, then attached it to the bottom of the vest. Once again the material contracted, formed tightly over his boots and legs, dividing roughly into two appendages. But when it was done, another web-like flap of material stretched between his legs from crotch to knees, loose enough so he could move freely.

Diego stepped back, held out his arms. "How do I look?"

"Ready for space, I guess."

"Except for the helmet," Diego said, frowning. "Where is it? Mine, not the one you brought up."

Liz picked up Diego's helmet, handed it to him. "You going to put it on?"

"I said 'all the way,' didn't I?" Diego sighed, and put the helmet over his head. He brought the helmet and vest collars together and clicked them shut . . . and disappeared.

The effect was stunning even though Liz had expected it. Even looking closely at him, sensitive to inconsistencies, odd visual tics in the air before her, she had trouble believing he was still there.

"Diego?"

"Yeah, here." His voice was more muffled than usual, like a hollow whisper. "Can you see me?"

"No."

Diego didn't say anything for a long time. Then, catching vague glitters of reflection out of the corner of her eye, she realized he was moving. She tried to follow the movement, which was silent and quick, but after a minute she no longer had any idea where he was, even knowing what to look for that might give him away.

"Diego?"

No answer. She turned in a slow circle, searching for him. "Diego?"

An invisible hand gripped her shoulder and she jumped back, heart pounding.

"Jesus Christ, Diego, you want to give me another heart attack?" She stepped back a few paces from where she thought he must be.

"Sorry, Liz," came the hollow whisper from in front of her. "I was just testing things out."

Liz closed her eyes for a moment, breathed slowly and deeply. She needed a cigarette. When she opened her eyes, she could not see Diego, of course, and she wondered if he had moved again.

"Diego?"

"I'm still here," he answered. "I'm going to try pushing some of these other slots on the helmet," he said. "See if anything happens now I have a whole suit."

"Diego, don't. Look what happened last time."

Diego snorted. "Think anything worse could happen?"

He didn't say anything more, and Liz stood looking toward where his voice had come from, wishing she could see what he was doing. But she couldn't see or hear anything from him.

While she waited, wondering what, if anything, she should do, the heat from the sun seemed to intensify, and the animal sounds from the jungle around her—whirring and clicking of insects, screeching of birds, snuffling of ground creatures—began to pulse, growing louder, then fading, then louder, then fading again. Sweat trickled down her sides, her face.

A bright flash of light, then a muffled explosion of sound and a blast of cold struck her, knocking her backward and off her feet. Liz hit the earth, breath knocked out of her. Then there was silence, even the jungle had gone quiet, and she lay without moving, trying to regain her breath. For several moments she could not breathe, but then something released in her chest and air rushed into her lungs, and she began breathing again in huge gulps.

Liz sat up, saw steam rising from the ground a few feet in front of her, the mosses and ferns crushed and covered with a white, crystalline film that looked like frost.

"Diego?"

No answer.

"Diego?"

Still no answer.

On hands and knees, still breathing hard, Liz crept forward until she was at the edge of the steaming, white-frosted patch of earth. She reached out, touched one of the crushed ferns.

Cold. The coating *was* frost, now rapidly melting and evaporating in the heat of the jungle. What the hell had happened?

Liz sat back on her haunches and called out one final time, as loud as she could manage. "DIEGO!"

Nothing. The air was nearly silent, but as she sat there waiting, hoping to see or hear *something* of the old Italian, the jungle sounds gradually returned—tentative and quiet at first, then growing louder and louder until it seemed to her that thousands of creatures surrounded her, and were closing in.

Diego was gone, she knew that. Dead or alive, he was somewhere else. Liz slowly rose to her feet, and the jungle sounds seemed to subside, return to normal. But there were other sounds now—her heartbeat pulsing in her throat and pumping through her skull, a slight rushing in her ears.

Liz walked over to the extra helmet and vest she had retrieved from the buried structure, looked down at them. She should go back, she told herself. Leave everything here, cover the opening and camouflage it, then return to the town. Return to the States, as Samuelson wanted.

But she knew she was not going back—not to the States, not even to the town. This was where she belonged now.

She picked up the helmet. She had no interest in the vest, or in any other pieces of the suit. She would not be going after Diego. She was staying *here,* and the helmet was all that mattered.

With the helmet in her hands, she gazed around the clearing. She had the tent, which would do for a while, and maybe later she could build something more permanent. There would be enough food in the jungle, there was water nearby, and there were still a few bottles of wine for the headaches; after the wine was gone, she would manage somehow. She would have to give up coffee, and cigarettes. And her sight, of course.

Liz put the helmet over her head, adjusted it. The interior padding began to swell, encasing her, and for a moment she panicked as the padding closed over her nose and mouth; but within moments air passages had formed, and she could breathe again.

She could not see anything through the blackened visor, and she wondered what it was going to be like, to sense the world around her as Diego had. A new way of seeing, a new reality of sorts. A new world.

Liz breathed deeply, felt for the largest depression on the side of the helmet, and pressed. ●

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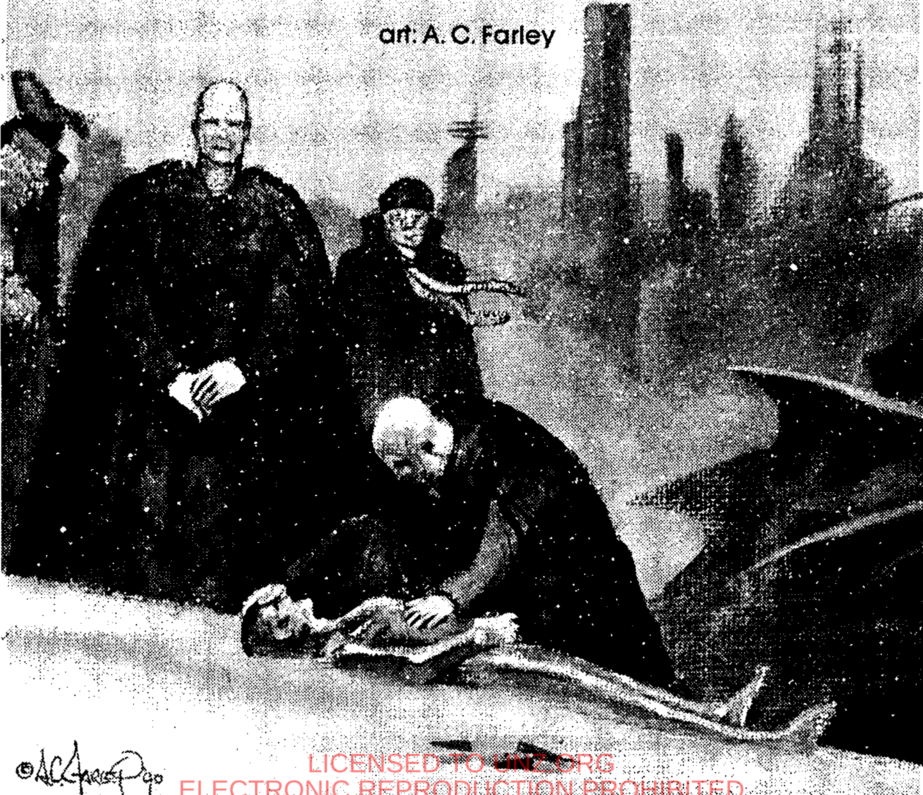
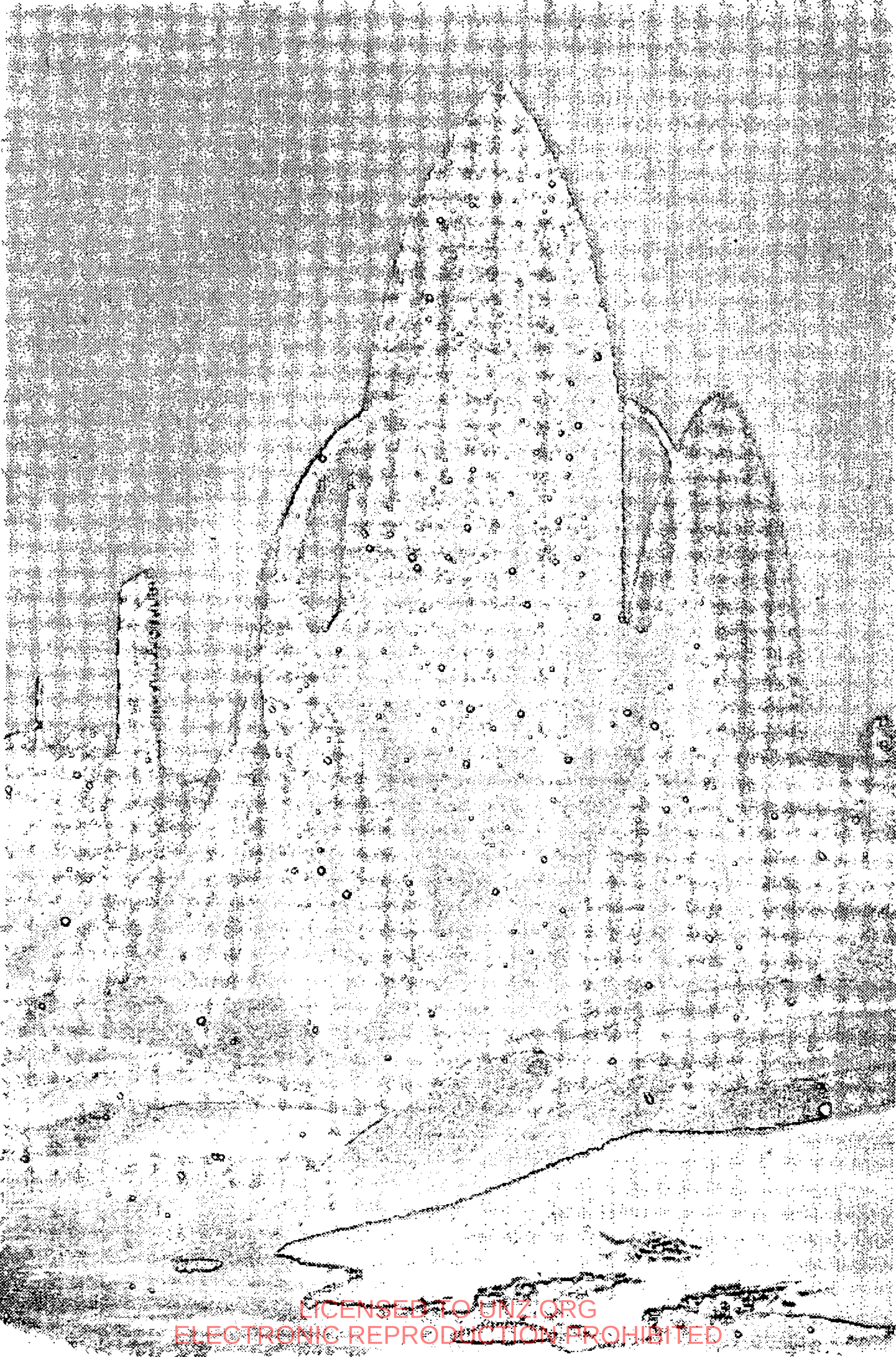
The staggering influx of alien cultures
into a volatile and decaying Boston
that is slowly sinking into the sea
is certain to cause unrest.
Some people may try to cope by
imitating the alien, others may resort
to violence, and a few may look for
a third way to live with
change and turmoil in . . .

THE PLACE OF NO SHADOWS

By Alexander Jablokov

art: A. C. Farley





The poured concrete building had once been the headquarters of a software company of some sort, part of the office developments that had replaced the decaying warehouses in Kendall Square, Cambridge. The glass in the windows was long gone. The gray acrylic carpets had been rolled up, exposing the concrete slab of the floor, and the shattered plastic office furniture had been dumped in the parking lot. Owls roosted above the acoustic paneling.

Two men in students' long robes sat in the large windowless third floor room which had once housed the high speed Cyber computer, cooked stew over an alcohol burner, and studied scenes of Procyon IV on a holographic wall screen.

The stew was of fish, clams, and mussels, flavored with a fennel bulb. Lester Kronenbourg, a heavy-set man with drooping jowls, dipped his spoon in and tasted the food. He licked his spoon clean and stared off into Procyon IV, where two moons were rising over a sinuous sand dune. A spidery vehicle with five balloon tires sped over the dune and vanished from sight.

Chris Tolliver ran a long-fingered hand over his high bald head and raised his eyebrows.

"What do you think?" he said.

"I think five wheels is a ridiculous number for a dune buggy." Kronenbourg got up and walked over to the data reader, a leathery device that pulsed slightly and had the obscene look typical of Targive technology. He had rigged a link to the storage codes of the octahedral Procyon dataform which he had bought that morning at Copley Mall. Manipulation of the soft projections on the data reader changed the scene, now following the five-wheeled dune buggy as it sped past a field of what looked like photovoltaic panels. Its driver, of a species of alien as yet unseen in Boston, and hence on Earth, was squat and muscular, with a head like a washtub. "Look at the complexity of the suspension," Kronenbourg complained. "Absurd."

"Never mind the suspension. The stew. What do you think about the stew?"

Kronenbourg shrugged. "What about it? I've been in Boston for ten years. My blood is clam juice. My sweat smells like kelp. Fish stew is fish stew. I eat it. Don't expect me to discuss it."

Tolliver lived in the building, in a somewhat better appointed room on a lower floor, with a plastic sheet across the windows. Kronenbourg lived off in Charlestown. They met in this room to perform their research and argue. The arguing took up most of the time.

The bank of lights in the ceiling, connected by a data feed to the reader, had changed its spectral characteristics to match Procyon's. Somewhere outside, it was a December Boston day, cold and overcast, but the blank-walled room was filled with harsh, too white sunlight.

These abandoned buildings, near the large concentration of alien schools and academies in Cambridgeport, were filled with students. Too poor to live elsewhere, they lived communally in the old offices, fought, argued, made love, and studied the deviant philosophies of several dozen worlds. Tolliver found the presence of students stimulating. Kronenbourg tried to recruit them for the Institute, his great cultural engineering project.

Tolliver stood up and stretched. His thin neck and wrists stuck out of his billowing, colorful robe, and he looked like some festival scarecrow. Students of alien cultures affected such robes, because they made the bodies underneath them anonymous.

He peered into the wall screen, where the dune buggy rider was now speeding along a beach, Procyon hanging low over the water beyond.

"Look at the way the skull sits on the spine," he said. "Interesting. Looks like a torsion arrangement. It could use that huge head as a battering ram, like a goat."

Kronenbourg fiddled with the data reader, which sucked unpleasantly at his fingers. To create it, the Targives had modified some hive insect until the queen had a mass of hypercircuitry in her abdomen. The Targives never liked leaving anything the way they found it. As he changed the settings, scenes of mountains, cities, machinery cross-sections, chemical structures, and elaborate taxonomic diagrams of leafy plants flashed on the wall.

"Can you pull anatomy and physiology on the sentients?" Tolliver said. He was trying to formulate a general theory of sentient physiology across all planets of origin, a grand synthesis.

"Out of this mass of useless knowledge?" Kronenbourg grumbled. "Bah. I shouldn't waste my time."

"It's not a waste of time, Lester. The more we know—"

"The stupider we become. Just so." As Kronenbourg bent over the reader a thickset Asian woman burst through the door. She was gasping for breath. She had no eyebrows and her head was shaved.

"There's a dead alien in the quadrangle at EDS," she managed to get out, and sat down on the floor.

"At the Div School?" Tolliver asked. "What is it doing there? What species?"

"I don't know," Ang said. She sprawled out on the floor. She wore a green suit covered with metallic scales. As she moved, colored ruffs erected on her back and her arms. These were part of her outfit and were controlled by myoelectric connections to her muscles. "It's no accident," she moaned. "It can't be. It isn't just dead."

"Murder, then." Kronenbourg said. He shut the reader off. It shuddered and Procyon IV vanished. "Or suicide? Witchcraft? What are you saying?"

She glared up at Kronenbourg and her back ruff erected in anger. "Good for you either way. You like them dead. You can study them, and they don't threaten you. This one taught modes of perception and had thoughts like crystal. You knew who he was. Did you kill him, Lester?"

Kronenbourg flinched. "I did not. You know that."

She laughed, a liquid, burbling sound. "Yes. But you know who did, don't you, Lester. How does that fit into your search for truth?"

Kronenbourg looked at her bleakly. "Truth? Where does that lie? With Braak-Kha, your cosmic swamp philosopher from Rigel? There is no truth there, not for a human being. All you have done, Ang, is sink into that swamp which to a Rigellian is the universal ooze, but to a human is just smelly mud."

She breathed heavily. The room had become suffused with an odor of sulfur and damp. She lay on the floor, resting her weight on her forearms, and for a moment, despite simply being an overweight woman wearing an odd suit, she did not look a bit human. "You wouldn't understand," she said. "None of you understand! It's a place of quiet and peace that they have found, and none of you can even come close to that center."

"Ang, please—"

"Stop it! I know what you want, and what she wants, and you can all of you go to hell!" She hunched herself on the floor, as if trying to get to her feet. She got partway up, then slumped down. She crawled out the door, muttering to herself, and gasping.

Tolliver stared levelly at Kronenbourg. "What do you know about this?"

For a moment, Kronenbourg did not meet his gaze. Then he raised his eyes. "I'm not going to make any accusations. Go to the Episcopal Divinity School and take a look. Think about it. And you'll know."

"What are you hiding? Why are you being so mysterious?"

"Because you damn well refuse to see what's in front of your eyes!" Kronenbourg said, suddenly fierce. "I've been arguing with you on behalf of the human race for, what, five years now? It's not just an intellectual game, Chris. I don't think you understand that. You can study the races of the universe, put them into your clever taxonomies and cross-reference them. Where does that leave us? Is the human soul just a spot on your charts?"

Tolliver turned away and started to pull his equipment together, putting it into a large canvas bag. "You're being ridiculous. We have an agreement, don't we?"

"We do. Free exchange of information and free decision. I thought you would have agreed with me long ago." He quirked his lips. "So much for free decision. But I still won't prejudice you. Examine the corpse of that teacher of perception and think about everyone you know. If you still can't figure it out, come to me."

"Damn it, Lester—" Tolliver took a deep breath. "You can be an annoying bastard." He stepped towards the door.

"The road to truth is long, and lined the entire way with annoying bastards. Aren't you going to eat your soup?"

"No time. The Koltsoi have a lot of influence at IPOB now, and they're an officious bunch. If they seal off the area, I'll get nothing."

Kronenbourg knelt by the pot and pulled his spoon out. "Well, it certainly won't keep. I'll take care of it for you. We can talk later."

The alien corpse rested against a puddingstone wall in the quadrangle of the Episcopal Divinity School on Brattle Street. Rock hard, the body looked like a giant translucent blue glass paperweight, a suitable public sculpture for an academic institution. Snow had settled over it, obscuring its features.

Dr. Maureen Lionel, professor of patristics and Dean of EDS, hovered nervously over Tolliver as he unpacked his equipment. Events had caught her on her way to Chapel, and she wore a long cassock with a stole over it. The Cambridge cops had cordoned off the corpse, and a curious crowd of divinity students, human and alien, had gathered just outside. A police officer leaned indifferently against a wall and smoked a cigarette, looking at nothing in particular. Dr. Lionel shooed the students away with quick gestures, as if driving crows from a cornfield. Tolliver watched the heavy, pachydermish form of a Tulgut lumber away, *Book of Common Prayer* under one of its four arms, and wondered why someone would come light years to become an Episcopalian.

Dr. Lionel excused herself. Tolliver brushed snow off the alien and attached his instruments. There were hints of form within it, but no more than hints. The corpse gave him a frightening feeling of familiarity, though he knew he had never seen anything like it. He tried to turn his mind to the purely technical aspects of his instruments but was distracted by the echoes of Kronenbourg's eternal arguments. They had been going over the same problems for so long that Tolliver sometimes felt that it was no longer necessary to have Kronenbourg around in order to argue with him.

"The only point of the knowledge I help you gather," Kronenbourg had said, "is for us to become more human. Not less. But you mistake me if you think I'm one of these Little Earthers, dressing up in historical costume, being self-consciously Terran. I don't even know what the hell that means. But the alternative is even worse. You know that, Chris, because your own students show it to you."

Tolliver looked toward the area where the cassocked Dean had vanished. The narrow spire of St. John's Chapel, a nineteenth-century Bostonian imitation of a fourteenth-century English parish church, thrust toward the overcast sky. The heavy puddingstone and sandstone buildings around the quadrangle, built just after the Civil War in imitation of a Flemish village, certainly looked self-consciously Terran, as did the sober, self-confident eighteenth- and nineteenth-century houses that lined the rest of Brattle Street.

Tolliver resented the fact that Kronenbourg's best argument did indeed come in the form of one of Tolliver's own graduate students, perhaps the most brilliant one of all. He wondered what Gavin Mercour would make of the body in front of him. Tolliver could have used his help here. Far from figuring out how the alien had died, Tolliver was having trouble understanding how it could have ever been alive. As far as he could tell, what had happened to it was that it had crystallized. If that made any sense at all. Crystals. . . .

He remembered how Mercour had looked the last time they met, wild-eyed, his shock of blond hair forever on end, seeking truth. Or rather, Truth. "It's amazing what they know," Mercour said. "They know that everything is transient, that to start something is to conceive of its end. It's incredible!"

"So now it's the Phneri who have the secret?" Tolliver said wearily. He rubbed his bald head. The Phneri looked like bedraggled sea otters. They were great builders, and great destroyers, whose perception of the inner natures of objects was nothing short of supernatural, but whose perception usually included that object's destruction. Whether one found them profound or ridiculous was a matter of personal preference.

"No . . . I don't know." Mercour turned away to look out a window. They stood among the old walnut and glass cases of the mineral collection of the Harvard Peabody Museum. It was late on a pleasant Sunday afternoon, and the museum was virtually deserted. Mercour, for some reason, had thought this a good place to meet. "They drive me a little crazy, sometimes, you know? All of them. As if they had the secret, but wouldn't tell me. Because I'm human, and wouldn't understand."

"Gavin," Tolliver said gently. "You should stop a little and think. They all have secrets. Each of these alien truths is like a light to you, held up in the darkness. Each of them shows something. But each of them casts shadows all around it. You'll never see anything this way."

"Would you rather I was like the rest of your idiot students?" Mercour said. "Spending my time studying neurotransmitter binding sites and joint motion in species that have ways of seeing the universe that we could never dream of? That's stupid. Never mind your shadows. If we on Earth light everything at once, then we can truly see. But to do that we have to learn." He gestured at the amethyst crystals in a nearby case, which glittered in the sunlight coming through the window, and chuckled, a derisory sound. "Imagine intelligent crystals, beings that are the end result of a billion years of evolution from viruses, rather than eukaryotic cells, as happened on Earth. Think of what we could learn from them, of the different way they would see."

"Please try to be sensible," Tolliver said, with futile patience. "You're supposed to be a graduate student in Systematic Physiology. Instead you chase after every alien guru who appears in Boston. They can't all be right. I want you to concentrate on your work, that's all. We're supposed to be working on the biochemistry of spatien energy transfer, remember? Your work has been superb. You may think it's stupid—"

"Not stupid, Professor. Irrelevant." Mercour walked into the light refracting off the corner of one of the cases and a rainbow played across his face. "I have someone who is teaching me modes of perception. He thinks I'll be able to see everything clearly. You'd like taking a look at him, Chris. He has a real weirdie of a physiology. I'm not even sure what keeps him alive."

Tolliver felt like sighing with exasperation. When he argued with Kronenbourg, at least, he had the feeling that he was dealing with a comprehending intelligence. Arguing with Mercour was like shouting at the wind. "So you think this one has the truth, and sees everything clearly lit? No shadows?"

Mercour's face tightened. "He does. He sees everything. I'm sure of it. He says that I don't want to see things that way. He doesn't understand. Why don't any of you understand?"

What would Mercour have made of this crystallized being? Tolliver was beginning to suspect that he already knew. He heard a hiss and looked up from the dead alien. A gleaming vehicle floated off the street and into the quadrangle of EDS. Snow blew around it in a blizzard. The vehicle settled down on its ground effect skirt. Its curving black carapace was still dripping water from the Charles River. Hatches opened, puffing vapor into the cold December air. "INTERSTELLAR PORT OF BOSTON" was written on the side in red script.

Two willowy figures leaped out of the object. The Koltsoi landed lightly and stepped forward, their motion improbably liquid. Their feet barely seemed to touch the ground and even after they stopped and gazed watchfully at Tolliver their torsos moved, arching back and stretching forward, as if their muscles could not bear a moment without flowing motion. A third figure followed them, more slowly. She was a human-Koltsoi translator. Tolliver glanced at her face and looked away, feeling ill.

One of the two Koltsoi twittered in several simultaneous voices, sounding like an aviary. Its arms floated up as if they were so light that it did not take muscle to move them, and it gestured, turning its hands in a set of curving gestures like a Balinese dancer. Despite himself, Tolliver watched in fascination, forgetting to judge the anatomy that made such grace possible.

Its movement held such a promise of indefinite extension in space that it was possible to forget the face. A Koltsoi face was occupied by six eyes of different sizes, two heat sensing pits, a scent organ that resembled a drooping goldenrod. Its flat slash of a mouth opened slightly to release two needle-pointed fangs.

"Move away, Tolliver," the human-Kolstoi translator commanded. "You are in violation. Move away."

"Don't be so touchy, Sudb," Tolliver said, addressing himself not to the translator, but to the Koltsoi that had spoken. "You haven't lost anything by my looking at this one. Do *you* know what happened to it?" The Koltsoi were an officious bunch, and sought to control not only IPOB but Miller's Hall, the main arena of contact between humans and aliens. If possible, Tolliver suspected, they would have tried to rule Earth, but this, of course, was not permitted.

The translator twittered at the Koltsoi, which twittered back.

"That is irrelevant. Move away!" the woman shrieked. Her implanted fangs had left creases in her lower lip, and she had to close her mouth with close concentration to avoid wounding herself. "Your curiosity is inappropriate."

Looking at her made Tolliver sick, but he forced himself to examine the surgical technique. A human had probably done it, someone with a good hand and a bad soul, like Teagarden at Brigham and Women's, but he had gotten the technique from the Targives. Things like turning humans into Koltsoi seemed to charm the Targives.

Her eyes had been removed and replaced by the bulging green hemispheres of Koltsoi primary eyes, which stared relentlessly since her eyelids had also been removed. Secondary eyes had been inset into her temples and chin, feeding into auxiliary image processing centers linked into the occipital lobe of the brain. Or at least that was how Tolliver would have done it. Two heat sensing pits had replaced her cheeks, and the very bones of her face had been bent and modified, as if they had been hard wax exposed to the heat of a furnace. Her nose was still human.

Bone insets in her arms, legs, and spine made her eight feet tall, and she stood only with difficulty, the stretched long muscles weakened by the modification. The operation had given her a turnout that would have been the envy of any ballerina, and she stood in fifth position, heel of one foot to the toe of the other. There were traces of her humanity left, but no more than that.

Tolliver imagined her as a young woman, gawky and rawboned, perhaps studying dance and longing for transcendent grace. What was more graceful than a Koltsoi? So she had tried to become one and as a result could barely walk. She still moved her arms in port de bras like a ballet student at the barre, but compared to the Koltsoi she jerked like a mechanical insect.

And Ang had come to him the previous week, pleading for webbing, for gills, for a protective shell of implanted scales, so she could live with her Master in the aromatic mud of Rigel, safe from the world in a cocoon of earth. What horrors were humans incapable of?

"Curiosity is always appropriate," Tolliver said. "Aren't you curious? Don't you want to know what I've found out?" He knew that the Koltsoi weren't at all interested. For once it didn't bother him that his understanding was considered to be irrelevant. He had too much to think about. A dead alien, Kronenbourg, and Mercour. . . .

"We should arrest you," the translator said.

Tolliver sighed in exasperation. "Be serious, Sudb," he said. "I have violated no human laws." He raised his eyebrows at the Cambridge policeman, who shrugged elaborately and lit another cigarette.

Both Koltsoi now twittered, faster than the translator could handle their angry speech, but there was nothing they could do except bluff. Dealing with Koltsoi was like being in grade school and dealing with the sort of kid who became hall monitor. Tolliver suspected that they knew nothing of this alien either, or where it had come from. They probably didn't care. All they wanted was for things to operate smoothly.

Eventually, they loaded the corpse and they all climbed into the IPOB vehicle and sped away. As soon as they'd left, the policeman began to take down the cordon. He had not said one word the entire time.

Their meetings were always planned, but her arrival was always unexpected. Kronenbourg sat by his window, listening to the lap of the running tide. It was growing toward evening and the lights of downtown Boston were coming on across the water. Out in the harbor, where once the dark silhouettes of the Harbor Islands would have been visible against the star-filled sky, piles and nuclei of colored lights now climbed their way toward the no longer anonymous stars. These were the headquarters, trade emporia, and palaces of a variety of races. A single narrow tower out in the water stretched upward into the night like a glowing string held taut by an invisible hand. The Boston skyline of Kronenbourg's school days had vanished beneath new construction. Just visible against the chaos of the Boston shore was the sharp spire of Old North Church, preserved as an historical monument.

"One if by land, two if by sea," Kronenbourg muttered to himself. "One billion if from space. Where was Paul Revere when we really needed him?"

He heard the wash of her vessel and walked down to the water entrance that he had chopped out of the brick wall of what had once been the first floor kitchen. His building had been a warehouse near the Charlestown Navy Yard, down at the base of Bunker Hill. After a brief flowering as condominiums it was now abandoned and sinking into the water along with the rest of Boston.

Her boat was a Boston Whaler with an elaborate dragon prow. She cut the engine, swung the tiller over, and drifted in expertly, allowing the backwash against the once white kitchen cabinets to slow the boat enough that it just bumped against the tire Kronenbourg had tied to the microwave oven. He reached out and helped her step out onto the large cutting board that served him as a dock.

Mi Nyo was a middle-aged woman, hair graying. Her round face was virtually unlined, and she had a small, flat nose. She was a Shan, a member of a hill tribe from eastern Burma, and Kronenbourg's recognition of the distinction between her and the rest of the "Cambodians" who had emigrated to Boston had been an early element in their association. Mi Nyo wore a gray wool skirt, bulky sweater, several large lacquer bracelets, sensible leather shoes, and a string of pearls around her neck. She had never been pretty.

"Well?" Kronenbourg said.

"We have more support," she said, sipping the tea he had made for her. Kronenbourg had exactly two unbroken Spode china cups left from his family inheritance, and he brought them out only when Mi Nyo visited. "Serebrikov of Karnaval and the Subramanyan brothers of Fogg Ltd. have agreed to provide you with funding 'for the preservation of human culture.' "

"For the preservation of their profits, you mean."

"As long as we get support for the Institute—"

"I know, I know," Kronenbourg said irritably. "It shouldn't matter that they support me simply because human culture is the market where they sell their goods, but it still does."

"We will get help however we can," she said, eyes glittering. Beneath the elegantly dowdy Boston matron Kronenbourg could see the pirate and looter she had once been, when she and her lover had run a speedboat armed with a .55 caliber chain gun out of Hull, before its destruction. Her crimes had been the foundation of the wealth of her interstellar trading company, but twenty years had passed, and her past had vanished into oblivion along with Hull. Now she looked as if she'd spent those years at Vassar. Her hobby was orchids, which she grew in a hothouse and displayed at the Boston Horticultural Society.

"Yes," he agreed. "However we can."

"And do whatever we need to remain human." She nibbled on a stale water biscuit. He was too poor to offer her any other food. He'd had dinner at her apartment once, high above the water, where the endless stream of boats on the wide reaches of the flooded Charles had looked like water bugs. She'd made cod cakes and Boston baked beans. The cod cakes had had peanuts in them, and the baked beans had been flavored with phuoc nam. The salty Southeast Asian fish sauce had made the beans, for some reason, taste even more Bostonian.

She was a fanatic, he knew. All those who supported him were. For that matter, so were all those who opposed him. Didn't anyone do things simply because they made sense? Thirty years before, aliens had dropped through the Loophole and made contact with Earth. Boston, more by chance than anything else, had been established as the regulated contact zone. Since then, aliens from the entire galaxy had been pouring through the staid old town, and the tensions caused by their arrival had been increasing geometrically. Kronenbourg was beginning to suspect that they were becoming too strong for most of the human race to handle.

"Have you seen her?" Mi Nyo said, her voice suddenly low and sad. "How is she?"

Kronenbourg had been afraid of that question. He thought about lying. She would catch him. She'd been a businesswoman, of one sort or another, for over twenty years. She would know. "Yes. I saw her. I saw her this morning."

"And is she—"

"She's the same. The same, dammit! What do you expect to hear? Your daughter thinks she's a Rigellian swamp lizard. She's covered with scales and lives in the mud. She's not just going to get over it and come to her senses. Why do you torture yourself?"

She took in a quick breath but didn't cry. For one terrifying second he thought he had pushed her too far and she would. He had no idea of what he could do then. He needed her. She provided him with sense, with stability. Without her harsh understanding he would slide across the surface of things as if on hard ice. The Institute would remain a fever dream. He saw himself years in the future, a doddering old academic, still squabbling with Tolliver.

She straightened up in her chair. "You are right. She is an example of what must not happen to the rest of us. But—she does well?" She looked sharply at him, worried that he would tell some comforting lie.

"Extremely well. An excellent businesswoman, to all accounts. Braak-Kha's school is booming, his philosophy is most influential. It's comforting, nurturing, promising return to primal oneness. The student bars near Fort Washington all smell like wet sulfur."

She sighed. "Poor Ang. What a waste. She was so clever as a child. Why does she flee from the world in such a way?"

Kronenbourg thought of a childhood lived on a speedboat, listening to the chatter of a machine gun and the screams of her parents' victims, followed by the flaming destruction of home and father, when the Metropolitan District Commission aircraft had destroyed Hull. "She has reason enough, I suspect," he said.

As Mi Nyo sat quietly, remembering her daughter, Kronenbourg could just hear the rats scurrying under the floorboards. Rats, and others, pests from a dozen alien vessels, some chittering and insectoidal, some silent and lizard-like, all living on floating garbage in the interstellar amity of scavengers. Had rat culture been affected? Did some rats wonder if they were any longer truly rats? Kronenbourg killed them all alike, rat and giant pill bug, but their noises still kept him awake at night.

"What about Tolliver?" Mi Nyo asked. "Do you still seek to recruit him?"

"Yes," Kronenbourg said. He remembered that morning's argument. Tolliver had found the body of a murdered alien in the quadrangle at EDS. Had he drawn the correct conclusions? That body was a clearer argument than any Kronenbourg had ever come up with himself. It was also incredibly brutal. If he'd had the choice, Kronenbourg would never have used such an argument. Fortunately, he hadn't been offered a choice.

"Why do you want that academic?" Mi Nyo said. "He studies the aliens, does he not? How can he help us?"

Kronenbourg sighed. The discussion was getting old. "I'm tired of fanatics." He could say that, because Mi Nyo would never recognize the description as applying to her. "I don't want futile revolts against the alien presence. All that will do is spill a lot of blood. I need a man who can *think*. I need a man who can help us define ourselves in this new universe."

Mi Nyo shook her head in admiration. "You are so impractical, Lester. If you worked for me, I would fire you."

"Yes. I suppose I'm lucky that, instead, you work for me."

"With you, Lester. I work with you."

Kronenbourg smiled. "We all work together."

Tolliver passed through the great vaulting structure of the Copley Mall. The sun shone in through the high roof, gleaming off the supports and reflecting at odd angles. There were hundreds of shops here, selling things from a hundred planets. It was here that the open retail trade with the stars was conducted, the most visible part of commerce and, Tolliver knew from Kronenbourg's lectures, by far the least important.

The various trading combines handled the real high value exchanges, somewhere high up in the new towers that changed the Boston skyline almost daily.

The squat tower of Trinity Church, with its peaked red tile roof, refracted through the glass planes ahead of him, appearing and reappearing as he walked. He went down the stairs and out onto Copley Square, moving quickly through the cold wind. The Romanesque bulk of Trinity still reassured Bostonians that some things remained unchanged, though the tilting, twisted tower of the John Hancock building next door was a definite opposing viewpoint.

Mercour had insisted on a clandestine meeting. Tolliver walked into the church, counted up the proper number of pews, and sat down. He looked up into the great cubic volume which hovered overhead. The La Farge murals of Biblical scenes painted there fascinated him, largely because they were so difficult to see. A body at the Episcopal Divinity School, a meeting at Trinity . . . was Mercour's madness tending towards Episcopalianism? To be driven by the multiplicity of truths inhabiting the universe into genteel Anglo-Catholicism was a quintessential Bostonian spiritual trajectory.

"Professor Tolliver," Mercour said behind him. "Please don't turn around." Tolliver felt the cold sharpness of a knife at his neck. "I'm glad you could meet with me outside of your regular office hours."

"Where have you been?" Tolliver said. "Everyone in the department has been worried about you."

Mercour chuckled. "Working on some extracurricular projects."

"Like murdering aliens and dumping their bodies in the quadrangle at EDS?"

Mercour took a breath. "Ah, so you figured it out. But why should you be mad at me? It was the perfect problem in alien physiology. How do you kill a crystalline being? 'Precipitate' might be a better word. Relax some of the bonds and the whole thing falls into another conformation, a more stable one."

"Death is more stable than life, Gavin, and life inevitably collapses into it. That's not news. He was your teacher, wasn't he? The one you told me about that afternoon at the Peabody. Why did you do it?"

"I hate them," Mercour said. "I *hate* them. All of them. This one dropped through our Rabbit Hole on his own, from God only knows where. Landed in the Contact Area like a good little boy. In Newton, though. Lucky the gangs didn't get him. Then he ate his spaceship. Just sat down and ate it, drive core and all. Without salt. Then moved down to Cambridgeport and opened his own school. It probably took him three months to get there from Newton, walking along the bottom of the Charles."

"Stop it, Gavin, please," Tolliver said. "Quit cluttering things up. I want information. Why did you kill that being? Was it for knowledge?" He felt a deep frustration. Mercour's mind had been so bright and sharp once, like a jewel. How had this happened to him?

"I tried so hard to see the universe clear," Mercour said. "He was a telepath. I begged and pleaded with him. I was his only student, you know. He was discouraged by the fact that no one seemed interested in what he had to teach. Finally, he let me see the universe through his senses." Mercour choked. "It was madness! He saw the insides of things, and their ends, and their beginnings, and so much more, and still none of it made sense. *None of it made any sense at all.*"

His voice was so anguished that Tolliver wanted to turn around and comfort him, remembering the eager boy Mercour had once been. The knife at his neck stopped him.

"You can't see the universe clearly until you know who you are, Gavin," Tolliver said. Annoying as he was, Kronenbourg was right about that. "Who are you?"

Mercour's breath hissed out, and Tolliver felt the knife edge press against his neck. Mercour, who was familiar with the anatomies of a dozen species, certainly knew where the jugular vein and carotid artery were in the human body.

Three Boston Police officers suddenly came through the door behind the baptismal font. They stopped and peered into the darkness of the church but did not move further.

"Oh, God," Mercour said. "How did they find me? You led them here!" Mercour shouted. "You bastard!" The knife edge pressed harder, but then the pressure vanished. Mercour leaped over the pew and ran for the doors. The police watched impassively as the graceful figures of the Koltsoi appeared at the doors, dark shadows against the light streaming in. They moved with slow curves, swaying like water plants, their once human translator in front.

"Halt," she said. "Halt, or—"

With his shoulder, Mercour hit her hard in the side. He must have gauged his blow precisely. She shrieked and crumpled to the floor, bent double in the wrong direction. Bones protruded through the skin of her chest. She continued to scream, a high-pitched sound like a teakettle on full boil. Blood spattered on the floor. Mercour dodged toward the doors but the Koltsoi, strong despite their slenderness, gathered around him.

Pulling a can out of his student robe, Mercour sprayed them with a dark mist. They clutched at their eyes and stumbled away, twitching as if electrocuted.

"Remember this trick, Professor!" Mercour yelled over his shoulder. "Koltsoi are allergic to WD40. Hah!" And he was out of the doors and gone.

Tolliver started to get up, and felt a hand on his shoulder. It was one of the three officers. He had first taken the hand as a gesture of comfort, but it tightened painfully.

"Professor Tolliver," the officer said. "Will you please come with us? We have some questions."

"Don't we all, officer. Don't we all."

Tolliver stopped at the edge of the highest pool of water. Its outflow poured down into a series of pools below, and then into the ocean. They were surrounded by snow and rime ice. "Damn it, Kronenbourg, what are you doing? Why have you brought me to this godforsaken place?" In the week since Mercour's disappearance, Tolliver's face had become gaunt and tight. He had kept to himself and stayed away from his department.

Kronenbourg had somehow arranged for the charges of accessory to murder to be dropped, and gotten him released from jail. Tolliver was bewildered by this unexpected display of power. "You said there would be no quid pro quo."

Kronenbourg slumped after him, his face mournful. His heavy coat flapped around his knees. "That's what I said, and that's what I meant. You're under no obligation to me. I didn't spring you from jail to get something from you. But our argument isn't over, Chris. Mercour has something to add."

Tolliver turned to him. "Do you know where he is?"

Kronenbourg nodded heavily. "I do. That's why I brought you here. Come on. I think you'll find his argument quite convincing."

The ruins of what had once been South Boston could be seen beneath the ocean surface. Out of the water rose Telegraph Hill, the only place surviving. It had once been the site of a high school, but now supported the elaborate black structures of the Targive citadel. They looked like tents, or folded bat wings. Kronenbourg thought that they actually were the wings of some beast modified beyond recognition, bones forming the supports, skin the fabric. No one knew for sure, of course, because the Targives kept themselves secret. Conduits carried streams of water from the citadel and out to here.

Steam rose from the Targive outflow, filled with exotic metallic salts which formed poisonous blue-green and orange crystals on the ruined building foundations. Nothing grew here, on either land or water. This part of town had once been inhabited by conservative Irish, deeply prejudiced against the influx of blacks and Hispanics. Now they were gone, and an alien citadel spread its wings above their abandoned community.

"How did you know that Mercour had killed that alien?" Tolliver said. He had kept away from Kronenbourg all week, but the questions had been eating at him.

"Do you still think I had something to do with it?" Kronenbourg said. "Don't be ridiculous. I pay close attention to the madness that goes on in the schools in Cambridgeport. I can draw obvious conclusions. It's time that *you* started to pay attention, Chris."

Scavengers lived near the water in huts built of old vinyl siding and asphalt cut from the twisted and useless roads. A variety of objects found their way into the Targive outflow, no one knew whether by accident or on purpose. Some were useful devices, others deadly traps. The scavengers stayed near the toxic water, sickening and dying, but bringing forth treasures. One treasure they had found was the body of Gavin Mercour.

Hollow-eyed men and women examined the interlopers from the doors of their shacks, motionless save for their steaming breath. Several of them greeted Kronenbourg familiarly. They directed the two men to their discovery.

Mercour lay on the edge of one of the pools, face up, eyes open. His eyes were refractive transparent spheres, like rock crystal or leaded glass, and the rest of his body was of dark, translucent blue stone. He looked like the victim of an unusually artistic Medusa.

" 'Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.' " Kronenbourg quoted.

Tolliver knelt by the pool. The physical structure of Mercour's body was identical to that of the alien he had killed in Cambridge.

"How did they do that?" he wondered aloud. "They must have replaced his body bit by bit, like making petrified wood."

"Except that they kept him alive while they did it," Kronenbourg said. "That's the Targive way. They never deal with anything that isn't alive. They probably gave him the structure of the living alien, then crystallized him the same way he murdered his victim. Poetic justice, with a vengeance."

Tolliver looked into the deep transparent eyes. "He was hoping to find a place with no shadows, where he could see. I suppose that's why he finally tried to get to the Targives. Do you suppose that he saw the truth before he died?"

"I doubt it. Human beings don't have much aptitude for being crystals." Kronenbourg sat down on a pile of old bricks that was slightly higher than the surrounding tidal marshes, and started to dig small flat stones out of the soil nearby. "They don't have much aptitude for being swamp lizards or Koltsoi, either, but that doesn't stop them."

Tolliver sighed. "I suppose not. Where there is light, there are shadows. If only they didn't tempt us the way they do! Sometimes I think that all aliens are just personifications of our neuroses, physical manifestations of what we fear or desire. But they are actually, demonstrably real. That's what's so terrifying about them."

"They *are* real," Kronenbourg said, irritated. "Have no doubt. Just ask poor Mercour. We can't blame the aliens for luring us and causing us to doubt our own humanity. The fault is our own." He had dug out quite a pile of stones. He handed some to Tolliver, who looked confused. "Look at their shape. You can see what they're good for."

Kronenbourg stood up and pitched his first flat stone at the poisonous water. It skipped twice. Tolliver smiled and whipped his arm in a lazy arc. His stone skipped seven times, clear to the far side. It had been years since he'd done anything like that.

Kronenbourg grunted. "Someday, the Institute will be a large building with marble columns. My statue, and yours, will stand in the Great Hall, looking nobly off into the future. The custodians will believe that human culture is preserved in the Institute's glass cases. They will be wrong, but their error is inevitable." His next stone sank straight into the water.

Tolliver's stone skimmed across the water and almost wanted to fly. "What do you mean?" The long-strained muscles of his face relaxed.

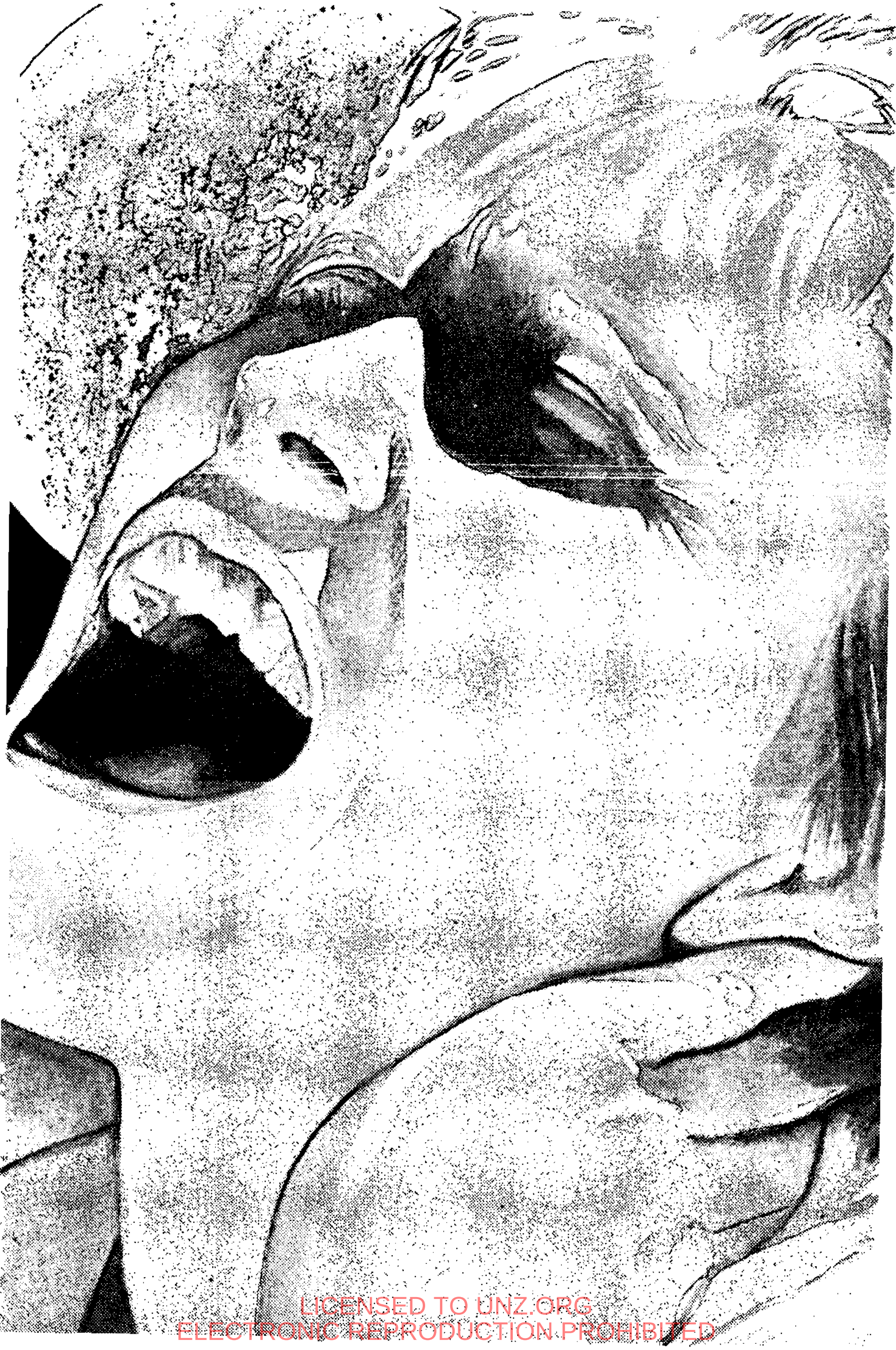
Kronenbourg smiled at him. "I'm glad you're with me, finally. We'll spend the rest of our lives dealing with morons, but we'll survive. And who knows? We may actually get some to use their human minds against the universe properly. The same way that you use the flatness of the stone to skip it across the water." His next try was perfect, nine, at least. He looked pleased with himself.

They stood there, skipping their stones and talking, until it got too dark to see. ●

PRIMATE PRIMER

Even chimpanzees eliminate the stranger,
Three on another beat the alien to death.
Male gorillas slaughter females who grow older,
Pounding the bodies long after life has left.
So Cro-Magnon killed Neanderthal,
Primate to primate as we might expect.
The difference was Cro-Magnon won with syllables,
The larger, stronger species caught in a word-spun web.
(Forty thousand years ago when our minds changed,
Making it henceforth possible for us to hurt more with less.)
Precision bone weapons and shining art in caves—
Culture and murder are the shapes of tongues and breath,
Power and nuclear war, the language of success.

—Ace G. Pilkington



REUNION

by Melanie Tem

Melanie Tem's first novel, *Prodigal*, will be published in 1991 by Dell. Other recent sales include stories for the anthologies *Cold Shock*, *Skin of Our Soul*, and *Final Shadows*. Her latest story for *IAsfm* is a harrowing tale of loss and transformation.

art: Laura Lakey

"Oh, and I saw Alice Ann Froelicher the other day," Susan said, opening her door into the green midnight. "She looks like a zombie."

Susan got out and shut the door. That left Michelle alone in her friend's station wagon, which abruptly contained all there was in the world and all there ever would be now that Danny was dead. Danny was dead. Michelle thought the words deliberately, and pain slashed at her again.

She thought about dying here and now. Rick and Wendy would be better off without her, a mother who couldn't even keep her child alive. She laid her head back against the seat and waited, but carbon monoxide didn't waft in to fill the car any more than a drunk driver had crossed the Interstate median, or the plane had blown up over the Midwest, or she'd died of a broken heart. Both life and death had teeth and claws; she couldn't escape either of them. She couldn't will herself to die without taking active measures to make it happen, and that was too hard; she couldn't will herself to go on living, either.

Susan was waiting. Something shapeless and desperate was waiting, too, to see what form it might take. Michelle lifted her head and groped for the door handle, then for a long moment was paralyzed with fear.

Since her son's death, she'd discovered a whole new set of terrors. For some reason, she was afraid now of music. She could hardly look into a mirror, afraid she'd be there, afraid she wouldn't be; she'd had her hair permed for the first time in twenty years, so she could comb it without looking. She was afraid of bright colors, strong tastes, textures like sand and upholstery fabrics that would chafe her skin. She was afraid of transitions of any kind: falling asleep, waking up, walking from one room to another, getting out of this car. With Danny's death she'd learned the price of allowing herself to be wholly in any one place.

Finally, Michelle forced herself to get out of the car, into her friend's side yard, into the town where they'd both been born and raised. There was a haze over the full moon. Without knowing where she was going, she put one foot in front of the other. The ground hurt through the soles of her shoes.

Then their paths crossed, by both chance and intent, in front of the station wagon, which was still ticking as it cooled after the ninety-mile trip up from the Pittsburgh airport through the August heat and humidity. Susan's footsteps crunched toward her house. Michelle's followed. Dimly, she was surprised that she would even recognize her own footsteps.

Susan stooped, straightened again. Michelle wasn't quick enough to avert her eyes from the yellow toy dump truck she'd picked up. Pain flared, strobed in her chest.

Susan detoured into the front yard, which faced quiet, tree-lined Euclid Avenue. When they were kids, they'd believed themselves to have very different dreams, and each had secretly considered herself superior to her friend, safer, more in control of her life. Michelle had dreamed of moving to a faraway city, or a series of them, and Susan of having a big old house on Euclid Avenue in their hometown, which was, Michelle still agreed, the prettiest street in the world. That part of their plans had materialized, and turned out to be not so different from each other: the *places* where things were to happen.

Now Susan came back with a blue-striped tube sock and an orange T-shirt, both of which glowed slightly in the moonlight. In Michelle's laundry room at home was a drawer full of single socks, saved in the forlorn and seldom-realized hope that their mates would reappear. Three weeks after Danny had died, when she'd finally been able to remember all the steps required to do laundry, she'd thrown out all his socks from that drawer, so that Wendy wouldn't have to go through them every time she searched for one of her own. Now with every load came the dread that one of Danny's long-lost socks would magically come back from the dead.

Susan didn't say anything about the debris she was collecting from her yard, although maternal complaints would have been natural. This tiny act of friendship made it seem to Michelle, very fleetingly, that it might after all be possible to go on living. The thought seared.

As though neither of their detours had interrupted their conversation about Alice Ann Froelicher, Susan went on. "Her hair is wispy and steel gray now, and there are really deep lines in her face, almost like cuts. She hardly said a word. It was like talking to the living dead."

"Is something wrong with her?"

"She's had a hard life. Lots of abuse while she was growing up, and a couple of abusive marriages. I think she's found a way to live with it."

"Will she be coming to the reunion?"

"I asked her. She said her husband won't let her."

"She's remarried?"

"Her husband's a Southern Baptist minister, and I heard she has a new baby."

"She's forty!" Her own indignation made Michelle laugh a little, but she stopped as soon as she realized what she was doing. "We're *all* forty!"

"And having a slumber party." Susan chuckled. From her, too, it was an alien noise, and dangerous. She reached through the darkness to touch Michelle's shoulder. For an instant, Michelle mistook the affectionate gesture for attack, and did not pull back. "I'm so glad you came."

The invitation, from Linda Davison Brooks and Patty McKinney Emig, had announced, "We're all turning forty this year. If there was ever a time when we needed a slumber party, it's now!"

Rick had said, "It's too soon for you to go that far away. We need to stay together."

She couldn't bear the sound of the word "together." Like "family" and "our" and "home" and "love," it was a trap and a hoax.

Wendy had said, "You'll miss my choir concert, Mom."

Michelle had no clear memory of having decided to come, of buying the ticket, of packing, of saying good-bye, of traveling halfway across the continent, of what she had left behind. She couldn't ever go home. She had no home anymore. Rick and Wendy and everything else in her life had lost their substance and their weight, were no longer ballast enough to stop her from floating away. She had lost her place in the world.

Susan paused with the key in the lock of her back door and glanced back over her shoulder. "Can you believe it, Michelle? We're *forty*."

Being forty, being in the company of her lifelong best friend who was forty, made Michelle think of Danny, who would never be ten. "Five months ago, I'd have told you that the older I got the better my life got," she said, and forced herself to add, as though Susan wouldn't understand, "before Danny died."

"This is sure as hell not what I wanted my life to be like at forty," Susan agreed, and fell.

For a thundrous split-second, Michelle couldn't move. One instant Danny had been utterly alive, laughing and throwing his head back in the dappled spring sunshine, and the next time she'd seen him he had been utterly dead, no breath or warmth left in his body at all. One instant Susan was standing upright in the hazy hometown light of the full moon, and the next she was on her side amid flowerpots and toys.

"Shit!" Susan howled. *"I hate this!"* as if at Michelle, as if at the moon.

Michelle knelt beside her. Stray gravel on the flagstones seemed to be gouging someone else's knees. Something shapeless spread and thickened the shadows. On the other side of the fence, which made faint gray stripes in the darkness, the neighbors' dog began barking wildly. "Is it the Parkinson's?"

"*Everything's* the Parkinson's. It's the only thing I can count on in my life."

"Does this happen often, that you fall like this?"

"It's happened a few times, but I was always alone and nobody knew. Hal and the kids don't know."

"Well, you're not alone now."

But she is, Michelle thought, as if it were someone else's thought, *we're all alone, when it comes down to it.*

The shape of Susan's body in her arms didn't feel familiar; the disease made it tremble and twist, and fury flung it at odd angles against her. In the dim moist light of this place she hadn't been for so long, the colors and textures of Susan's skin and hair seemed altered, and her crying had acquired a subtle new timbre, had become something like a yipping that made Michelle chill in the hot clammy air. The neighbors' dog was steadily growling now and had sunk to its haunches behind the fence.

Michelle peered down at her friend, brought her face as close as she dared and wondered vaguely why that should require courage. Susan's face was distorted by fear and grief, stiffened by the Parkinson's, furred by the cloudy moonlight. Her teeth were bared as she struggled against the disease, which of course would win.

"Go on in," she managed to say. "I got the door open."

"Susan, I can't leave you—"

"Leave me! I need to be alone when this happens."

"What is it that's happening?"

"I'll tell you about it later. Tomorrow, maybe. In the daylight. Please go on in, Michelle. I love you."

"I love you, too, Susan. You're my best friend. You—"

But Susan had pulled away, beyond Michelle's reach, well beyond Michelle's ability to hold her. Apparently still unable to get to her feet, she was crawling across the patio into the gray-green reaches of her back yard. The growling of the dog next door was fainter now, and Michelle couldn't see the animal at all; she guessed it had backed away from the fence as Susan approached.

Soon a faint howling came from the stand of pines that marked the back edge of the lot. From beyond them rose the faint glow of the ice cream stand they used to frequent on sticky summer nights like this when they were kids. Michelle remembered the taste of rainbow ice cream, the smell of the creek from the other side of the highway, the many hurts of adolescence which only in retrospect were less real than those they'd discovered since.

She let herself into Susan's house as if she knew the way, and as soon as she was inside, she did. When she'd last been here she hadn't met Rick yet, Danny and Wendy hadn't even been imagined except in the most abstract and wishful of terms, and she'd been awash with quite another sort of loneliness than this, certain she was destined to live her life with no one to love.

The sofa bed in the living room had been made up for her, and beside it on an end table was a lamp with a round globe, soft yellow with pink raised roses. Someone had been thinking about her in her absence; without tangible proof of her existence, she had been in someone's mind.

Even if she'd been here, there would have been no proof. There was none now. When she lay down on the sofa bed, she couldn't imagine that there'd be any indentation in the mattress, any rumpling of the sheets. She had no substance. She was leaving no mark. She couldn't position her feet on the floor, because floorboards and carpet kept separating the flesh and bone.

Moonlight filtered through plants hanging and sitting on shelves in the bay window, blurring the patterns of their leaves and stems. Susan had made the plant hangers, stripped and sanded and stained the wood, embroidered the pillows for the window seat. She couldn't do any of those things now.

There were so many good things in the world, things whose very beauty would be the source of anguish when they were lost, as, one way or another, they all would be. Already, Rick and Wendy had blurred into anticipated grief; she had started the process of losing them, too. Danny was dead. She would not wait to lose anything else.

She should call home, let them know she was safe. But she was afraid.

At her house in Denver, two thousand miles away, it was two hours earlier than here, and there were two people every bit as important to her as her son had been, and in the next two hours of their lives—which in some confusing way Michelle had already lived in hers—she could well lose them, too.

Afire for her lost child, she lay between the sheets. She saw his face, discolored and turned away from her, no longer his face although it still looked like him. She reached out for him, and they passed through each other. He was moving into her past and she into his, and horror burned through her over and over and over, though she'd have thought there was no more fuel.

Danny was dead.

She could hardly bear to think those words in sequence. At the same time, she couldn't stop thinking them, one after the other. She fell asleep, there being no difference between pain-gauzed nightmare and waking thought, and didn't hear Susan come into the house.

Michelle stayed in bed until Hal and the children were out of the house. Hearing Susan's son's voice had been only slightly less painful than seeing him would have been, sitting with him at the breakfast table, watching his small sturdy feet in Velcroed sneakers and his fingers with dirty nails around the glass of juice.

Then she got up. As always since Danny had died, it was a bitter struggle to gather herself together enough to get out of bed. Her heart raced with fear at what might happen to her this day. When she brushed her teeth and washed her face at the bathroom sink, she avoided the mirror.

Susan had fixed coffee and juice, fresh strawberries with cream, toast. Michelle ate, and the food tasted good. That made her angry. Nearly two months after Danny's death, she'd absently bitten into a plum and been shocked to *taste* it, the skin and flesh under her teeth, the sweet-tart juice on her tongue. That had been the first time her swollen senses had allowed anything in but pain, and since then, try as she would, she couldn't stop them from letting in more.

Susan seemed steady this morning, although her face was stiff. The disease, Michelle thought; a disease like anger. Anger like a disease.

"Remember Isabel Haemer?"

The name's familiarity agitated Michelle, forced her to set her cup down before the coffee spilled. Someone, no doubt, from the past she shared with Susan. From before Danny had died. From before he'd even lived. From a past she didn't dare accept as her own.

The sudden loud click and whoosh as Susan started the dishwasher made Michelle wince. She tried to breathe deeply to calm herself; the air hurt going in and out. She took a tiny corner of toast into her mouth, and could scarcely remember how to chew and swallow. She sipped orange juice and recoiled; it was too cold and tangy.

Susan finished tidying up and sat down at the table. "Miss Haemer," she prodded. "Senior home room."

Miss Haemer. Of course. A small, unflappable woman who'd always worn bright clothes and sensible shoes. Old even then, though doubtless not as old as she'd seemed when they were seventeen. "She taught English," Michelle said, made uneasy by the pleasant and uncomplicated nostalgia that accompanied this memory. "She made us write a lot. Haiku and critical essays and ghost stories."

Susan nodded. "We thought it might be nice for us all to visit her this weekend. Sort of as part of the reunion."

"All right," Michelle agreed, although she couldn't imagine what she'd have to say after all these years to Miss Haemer, who probably hadn't known she'd had a son. But then, she had nothing to say to Susan or her other classmates, either, except the one thing in her life that had substance, the one thing that could hold her interest: *my son is dead my son is dead my son is dead*

"She's in the nursing home," Susan was saying. "Linda and Patty and I, and some of the others who've had her over the years, visit her every once in a while."

"Why is she in a nursing home?" It surprised Michelle to care, even as little as she did.

"Well, she's old. In her late eighties, I think. And you know she was shot."

Michelle did know that, or had known it once. When Susan had written her about it, she'd been shaken and saddened for a few days. But now the details wouldn't quite coalesce in her mind.

Kindly, Susan gave them to her. "She was walking her dog down along the creek, like she did every day, and some creep driving by on the Route

19 overpass shot her. No reason, apparently. She just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"And they've never found out who did it," Michelle guessed.

Without warning, Susan pounded her fist on the table. Michelle shrank back and fought to keep herself from bursting into tears. "Son of a bitch," Susan growled through clenched teeth. "I keep hoping something awful has happened to him, except I can't come up with anything awful enough."

"How long has it been?"

"It must be fifteen or sixteen years now."

There was a pause as they both contemplated the enormity of it. It did not, of course, even approach the enormity of Danny's death, which was the only thing that would happen to her for the rest of her life. Still, she found herself drawn to someone else's tragedy. "She was badly injured, wasn't she?"

"Paralyzed from the neck down."

The matter-of-fact tone reminded Michelle that this was an old anguish, overlaid by now with a myriad of other events in Susan's life and her own, and even in Miss Haemer's.

"She just lies there. I don't know what she thinks about," Susan was saying. Apparently she'd been talking for some time. Michelle realized that her eyes were aching from being fixed unseeing on her friend's face, and she forced her gaze to lower. "I keep telling her, it could bring some meaning and direction back into her life if she'd think about getting the guy that did this to her. If I had somebody to blame for what's happened to me, it would be a lot easier."

Then the brutal specifics of what she'd lost burst in Michelle again. Danny's laughter, like bubbles. The sunny, peanut buttery smell of his hair.

"She says it doesn't matter anymore who did it. She says this is her reality now and she accepts it. She says her life has meaning all by itself." Susan shook her head.

Michelle fell slowly forward and pressed her forehead against Susan's yellow-checked tablecloth, which was already sticky from the morning's heat and humidity. Susan reached across and put her hand on Michelle's shoulder, then winced. "Jesus, you're tense. I've never felt knots like these."

"I'm afraid to relax. I'm afraid of everything."

Susan was massaging the back of her neck now, her scalp under the tangled hair. Her touch brought an excruciating comfort. "Oh, Michelle, I'm so sorry this has happened to you."

Michelle tried to concentrate on the strong, painful motion of her friend's fingers, but was aware now only of an amorphous pressure on the back of her head.

"If I could take your pain away, you know I would."

Michelle gasped and cried out, "No! It's mine!"

Susan's hand tightened, and Michelle felt her nails. She turned her head on the table, but could see only the underside of Susan's arm, muscles and tendons working rhythmically. Hair made a fine dark halo around her wrist, oddly disturbing. Her voice was low and rough with fury as she said, "It's not fair. You and I are good people. We've never done anything to deserve this. We've lived by the rules."

The rhythm of her fingers had turned hard, and the nails hurt. Michelle pulled away, stood up, made her way to the refrigerator for more juice. "Doesn't Miss Haemer have anybody to take care of her?"

"Well, she's outlived her parents, of course, and all her brothers and sisters—I think she said there were five of them—and she never married."

Without willing it, Michelle had moved to stand behind Susan's chair. From here she saw the tremors, the deep gray hair. She thought to rest steadying palms on her friend's temples. But she knew that her hands weren't solid enough anymore to stop anything from happening, even this shaking that was now dissipating by itself.

The phone rang. Michelle jumped, burst into tears, pressed both fists to her mouth. Her heart was beating wildly and she couldn't feel her hands and feet. Parts of her, more and more parts of her, were spinning off. She was frantic for the loud, sharp noise not to be repeated.

Susan glanced at her worriedly as she reached to answer the phone before the second ring. She was so unsteady that she nearly dropped the receiver and had to hold it clumsily to her ear with both hands.

"Hi, Rick. I'm okay. How are you?"

People asked that question a lot now. "How are you?"—awkwardly, looking away or with a hand on the shoulder. It could never again be a casual inquiry; like everything else, it was now fogged with implications. *How are you since you lost your child? How deep is the wound? How can you still be here? What kind of mother can still be alive after her child has died?*

"Yes," Susan was saying. "She's right here."

Michelle backed away, leaving bits of her hands in wide, frantic gestures of denial through the air, bits of her voice trailing between them like the ghosts of other words as she managed to whisper, "No, no, no!"

Susan said to Rick, "Oh, I'm sorry, she's already in the shower. I'll tell her that you called." Clumsily she hung up the receiver. "Why wouldn't you talk to him?"

"Because I can't ever go home!"

"Oh, Michelle. He loves you. Wendy loves you."

"I love them, too." The awful truth of those precious words made her dizzy. "But I don't have a home anymore."

"Yes, you do. And a family that needs you."

"Don't say 'family'! I don't have a family anymore!"

"You and Rick and Wendy are still alive," Susan said, trying.

"I don't—believe that," Michelle gasped, utterly confused. "I've lost—everything. I've lost my self."

The world was tipping. Susan was very far away across the room. "Well," Susan said quietly, "you're welcome to stay here as long as you like."

Michelle raised her open face to the sky she couldn't see and wailed.

Patty was the first to arrive, shortly after noon. As she came along the sidewalk, Susan said suddenly, "You remember Patty, don't you?"

"What I remember most about her is how pleased you and I were when she got Homecoming Queen instead of one of the cheerleaders."

As she said that, however, Michelle realized that now, layered in streaks over those much earlier memories, what she really remembered most was the sympathy card Patty had sent when Danny died. In the clear, upright cursive that had always earned her stars in penmanship, she'd written: "My heart aches for you, and for us all. It could have happened to any of us."

At the very beginning, messages like that—from all over the country, from all across Michelle's life—had made a net that had helped to hold together some of the shards of herself. But it had not, of course, "happened to any of us." It had happened to her.

She wouldn't have known Patty. "You look great!" Susan observed. "You've lost a lot of weight in the last few months." Immediately, Michelle's mind did its own cruel, egocentric calculations: *Then she must have been fat when Danny died.*

Susan took the plastic-covered aluminum bowl of potato salad from the crook of Patty's arm. In its side Michelle saw bellied reflections: clouds, pine trees, three forty-year-old women, Susan's white house on Euclid Avenue, the monster that was her son's death lurking in countless shapes in the foreground, obscuring everything else.

As she carried the bowl on into the house, her steps slightly jerky and the top half of her body leaning slightly forward, Susan added, "And your hair looks good. I haven't ever seen it that color before, have I?"

"My new image. Image-of-the-week." Patty flashed a hot-pink smile and fluffed her very black, very curly hair with long pink nails. Then she came across the patio and bent to hug Michelle. "It's so good to see you after all these years! Almost makes it worth turning forty!"

Michelle sat rigid. Her skin hurt. The touch of another human being brought her near hysteria in almost any context—a nudge at her back in the supermarket line, a brush against her hair as somebody got settled in theater seats behind her, her daughter's good-night kiss.

Patty smelled of both musk and roses. She was wearing white short-shorts, a pink-and-white striped tank top, white high-heeled sandals with ankle straps. She was very tanned and her skin was smooth, although the bare shoulder where Michelle rested her cheek was softly crepey.

In high school, Patty Mae Derricott had been plain and shy. Nondescript brown hair had hung clumsily around a boxy face, and her figure had been boxy, too—virtually straight lines connecting square shoulders and square hips. Her clothes had never quite fit right, including her shoes, so that she'd always walked with a slightly stiff gait. Though there'd been a plain sweetness about her that had made her surprise choice as Homecoming Queen seem more sincere than sarcastic, Michelle had never known her to have a date. Then the rumor had sprung up that she was pregnant, and right after graduation she'd married a boy no one knew from another school. Distantly, Michelle had always thought that Patty might turn into somebody she'd like.

Now, when Patty straightened from the awkward hug, Michelle saw how deep the scoop of her neckline dropped, how blue her eyes were. She was sure that in high school Patty's eyes had been the same ordinary brown as her hair. Contacts, of course, and a lot of deep blue eye shadow.

Very directly, very gently, Patty said to Michelle, "I'm so sorry about Danny." She even knew his name. Michelle nodded, held her breath and gripped the arms of the chair.

Patty kept her blue eyes on Michelle's face and her hands on her upper arms until she had to breathe again. Vaguely, she was surprised that Patty's gaze and grip didn't pass right through. "Isn't it amazing," Patty said, "how much pain there is?"

"Pain is all I am."

Patty nodded and sat down crosslegged on the patio, keeping one hand with its many rings on Michelle's knee. "If you stay one person, you'll be hurt even more."

"What do you mean?" Michelle didn't care what she meant. "What do you mean?" she heard herself repeat, and clenched her teeth to keep from saying it forever.

"I know something about grief myself," Patty told her. Her mascara glistened with tears. "Over the last couple of years I've lost everything. My whole life. Several lives, in fact."

You know nothing about grief, Michelle thought savagely. *You didn't lose Danny.* But she asked, "What's happened?"

"Well, for starters, Bill left me and took the kids. I can't find them. Even hired a detective. They're just gone."

"Why?"

"Said I was an unfit mother. Said I was boring. Said I wasn't the person he'd thought I was." Patty shook her head; long, elaborate, multi-colored earrings swayed, kept swaying after her head had stopped moving. "Do you know that in twenty-two years I never once got a birthday present or a Christmas present from any of them?"

"And you never even thought that was weird until he left," Susan said. She was standing in the doorway leaning against the jamb, and Michelle could see her trembling; around her, because of her, the whole house trembled, but Michelle knew it wouldn't fall down, it would just stand there and shake forever, even though it was on the prettiest street in the world.

"They said they never thought of it. And they wouldn't have known what I wanted, anyway." Patty laughed a little. "That's probably true. I wouldn't have known what I wanted, either. Now, I want everything."

"Especially Joe," Susan said.

Patty shook her head. "I don't love Joe anymore."

"Sure."

"Well, part of me does and part of me doesn't."

"Does he like the black hair and the blue eyes?"

"He hasn't seen it." Patty touched her hair, batted her lashes. "Do you think it makes me look younger? He always says I'm too old for him. I'm only three years older than he is."

"Joe says a lot of dumb things," Susan said.

Patty sighed. "Susan doesn't like Joe. But then she didn't like any of the others, either. Remember Gary Schultz from high school? I went with him for a while. He's a lawyer now, and he likes smart women, so I read up on stuff and pretended like I'd gone to college." She laughed again, whether in pride or self-deprecation Michelle couldn't tell. "It worked for a while. Then he started saying I wasn't the person he'd thought I was. By now I've forgotten just about everything I read."

"And then there was Emmett Miller," Susan said. "He was about seventy—"

"He was sixty-seven," Patty said, looking down.

"—and he lived in a junky little trailer without running water out there in the hills behind the dam, and I guess what he wanted was some sort of child-woman, because you should have seen her, Michelle. Braids and braces and little short skirts."

"Actually, that was kind of fun," Patty said wistfully. "And I thought I was doing a pretty good job of being what he needed. But he died anyway."

"Here come Faye and Linda." Susan walked to the edge of the patio, stumbled and had to hold onto the post. "And Alice Ann!" It was an exclamation, although the tone of her voice was tight and muted. Her disease made it impossible to tell what she was thinking from either her voice or her face; she always looked and sounded as if she were keeping fury under minimal control by the greatest of efforts. Michelle imagined an explosion, all that contained fury and hurt bursting through the stiffened muscles and destroying either the disease or Susan herself. "Alice Ann, I'm glad you could come!"

Alice Ann had just had a baby. She didn't have him with her, but his spirit enveloped Michelle before she even knew it was there. Pain careened aimlessly inside her; she bit her lip and clutched the arms of the chair and didn't think she made any noise, though Patty looked at her sharply, made a move to put her hand on Michelle's knee again, then seemed to think better of it and stood up instead, leaving Michelle alone.

If she had no body and no mind and no heart, if she were only amorphous spirit—or, better yet, nothing at all—surely the pain would stop. She willed it to happen right there and then.

But she was as powerless over this as over her son's death; what she willed made no difference at all.

For the rest of the long hot afternoon, they sat on Susan's patio and talked, six women turning forty. It stayed hot and close into the evening. *Another day spent missing Danny*, Michelle said to herself, and in an odd way the thought was reassuring, like a mantra. But she had to admit that in this same day she'd tasted orange juice and wheat toast and potato salad, worried about Susan, heard and understood Patty's story of daring to be no one thing, noticed a bluejay flash from one pine tree to another. *There can be nothing but missing Danny.*

Faye and Patty and Susan chatted; they didn't see each other often, didn't spend much time in each other's company, but they lived in the same small town, shared time and space and landmarks. Linda and Alice Ann were very quiet. Michelle's head buzzed; she could feel her pulse in her ears, just outside her ears, and couldn't bring it back inside.

They sat around Susan's redwood picnic table with its brown-and-blue fringed umbrella and matching bench cushions, ate each other's food, consumed for deeper nourishment each other's stories of terrible hurt. Except for Susan and Michelle, they had never known each other very well and never would, but they would know each other's pain.

Michelle watched Alice Ann. The gray-haired woman sat very still unless someone said something to her. Then she would turn her head slowly and fix her blank gaze on the speaker. When the speaking stopped, her head swiveled back to its original position and she stared straight ahead and unblinking until someone spoke to her again. Michelle had nothing to say to her, and anyway suspected that nothing was worth risking for Alice Ann anymore, even the possibilities of words.

She watched Faye, too, who was blind and wouldn't see her watching. Susan mentioned Faye in almost every letter and phone conversation. Faye lived with her parents, who were in their seventies. She couldn't get from her bedroom to the living room without a guide. She couldn't fix her own meals. "That's not the way to do it," Susan kept insisting to Michelle. "You have to *fight*."

"Didn't you go away to college?" Michelle heard herself asking Faye, and wondered why she was asking.

Faye nodded. "A college for the blind in Florida."

"So why did you move back home?"

"Mom takes care of me. She likes to take care of me."

"I remember how you were going to travel around the world. You had scrapbooks on different countries. Greece. England."

"That was before I went blind. Now I can't do anything." Her plump hands were waving agitatedly, making such rapid and meaningless gestures that they blurred. "I've lost everything!"

Faye was making the same noise that Michelle made when the grieving for Danny coursed through her, the grating rhythmic shriek that took the place of breathing and didn't come close to wearing out the pain. It surprised Michelle to recognize that sound coming from someone else; until she started making it herself, she'd never heard it at all.

Alice Ann stood up from her end of the picnic bench and shuffled across the patio. Her face was blank, unlined, stiffer than Susan's and with no hint of Susan's constant struggle for expression and control. Her eyes were blank. Her hands hung limply at her sides. At the end of the patio she pivoted rigidly, shuffled back, and took her seat again.

"My life is completely empty. I have no reason to get up in the morning. I keep looking and looking for something to give my life meaning, but of course I can't find anything because I can't see. I spread myself out in all directions trying to absorb something that matters to me, and there's *nothing*." Tears coursed off her cheeks and chin like lava, as if to alter the contours of her face by adding new layers of soft flesh.

Faye had always tended toward the chunky, but now she was obese. Enormous knees below even more enormous and flapping orange culottes wouldn't wedge between the bench and the tabletop; fat drooped so thickly that the form and function of the knees as joints were completely obscured. She had to sit facing out, massive shoulders awkwardly turned toward the rest of them, flesh of one upper arm oozing between the planks.

"Mom gives me strength," Faye sobbed, "but it doesn't last. She doesn't have much more to give. I try to get strength from other people, because there are a lot of people stronger than me. But people don't come to see me much anymore, and it's hard for me to get out of the house."

"Not just strength," Linda said, so softly Michelle could hardly hear her. "Happiness, too, and beauty, and a reason for living. When you've gone through terrible things like we all have, it's not enough just to survive for sixty or seventy or eighty years. We need more than that. We've earned more than that—some of us with our blood, some of us with our tears."

During this passionate speech, Linda didn't move at all on the chaise lounge in the shadiest corner of the patio where she'd been lying ever since she'd come, and her voice scarcely rose above a whisper. She was very thin and pale, and her white-blonde hair was so short and sparse that her scalp showed through, translucent, with the suggestion of scarlet blood vessels and pale brown skull plates just beneath. She'd never had her buck teeth fixed, though they'd caused her such embarrassment in high school; if anything, Michelle thought, they were even longer now, and pointed.

Faye was crying hard. Her eyes were partly overgrown by the flesh of her cheek swelling up and her mouth by the flesh of her cheek swelling down. Pink skin fell from her neck over her orange collar. Her bulging chin hardly looked like a chin.

Faye managed to reach across the table at an awkward angle and pat Michelle's clenched fists. It was as if the flesh moved of its own accord; there was no visible movement of sinew or muscle or bone. Michelle turned her palms upward and clasped Faye's hand, trying to exchange kindness and comfort, but her fingers sank in and dissolved.

"You should have brought your baby," Patty was telling Alice Ann. "I love babies."

No babies. No new lives.

Alice Ann sat primly on the picnic bench as though it were a Queen Anne loveseat, straight-backed with her hands in her lap and her legs crossed at the ankle. She hadn't brought or eaten any food. After the first murmured greetings, Michelle hadn't heard her speak.

Everybody's child should die if mine had to.

The venomous thought came whole and unbidden into Michelle's mind; rage propelled all other thoughts farther and farther apart. Dizzy, she struggled to get up. She ran so quickly across the patio and into Susan's sweltering house that it seemed she was floating; her only connection with the world and anybody in it was the certainty that she no longer had a safe place to rest.

She fled through the house, over furniture and through doors that were open or closed, onto the front porch that faced Euclid Avenue. Huge sugar and silver maples would be brilliant red and gold in the fall. Anticipation of their intense color, of the sheer abundance of their leaves and the veins in their leaves, further enraged her. She flew back into the house, which shimmered in the descending twilight. She knew it was she who shimmered, she who barely existed anymore, and the wavering threads of consciousness and habit that bound her to human life all hurt. *Danny is dead.*

"No no no no!" She was on the floor somewhere, didn't know where she was and it didn't matter, couldn't feel the floor or her fists pounding it, could feel only the fire of her own breath which no longer stayed within the confines of her lungs or the cells of her body.

Someone was beside her, not touching, not trying to hold her together or calm her or make her come back to the hurting human world, just kneeling beside her, maybe having collapsed beside her, maybe unable to get up. It was Susan, who understood fury, whose fury had acquired a form of its own. "I know, Michelle, I know. It isn't fair."

"I—can't—stand it!" Michelle screamed. "I can't—live—with this!"

"There are ways," her best friend told her, "to get through the next minute and the next day and the rest of your life. You learn that your grief is too good to share with anybody else, and you keep it inside where it belongs and nurture it, until you find the time and the place to let it out. It transforms you."

"It's—tearing—me—apart!"

Something painfully soft pressed against Michelle's face. She opened her eyes to fur, dimly white in the light of the full moon that shone through Susan's bay window. A cat, purring, touching her nose very gently with the tip of its tongue. The cat's breath smelled pleasantly of milk and fish. The soft fur, the little stream of breath, the rough tongue easily penetrated Michelle, so that she felt them in the back of her throat, on the underside of her skin. Burying her face in the cat's side, she succumbed to pain that kneaded like claws.

Susan was on all fours beside her, very close. Moonlight and the odd blue light from the twilight sky reflected from Susan's eyes, which had acquired a reddish glow. She was growling, and her face had elongated dangerously. Hair covered her arms and legs, tufted from under her shirt. Her body was stiff, tensed, and shaking so violently that Michelle felt the tremors even though she and Susan weren't touching. The cat had disappeared.

Michelle tried to curl herself into a ball but found no solidity or protection in her body, stretched out and managed to shift away from her friend, who was, she saw, the very embodiment of the rage that had swept through Michelle herself and seemed to be gone now, leaving a profound emptiness.

From somewhere behind her, Patty said, "This happens when things build up inside her and she can't keep them under control anymore. It'll pass."

"She's going to hurt herself!" Michelle gasped. "Or somebody else."

"Yes," said Patty. Michelle turned her head slightly and found the other woman very close behind her. Her breath smelled pleasantly of milk and fish, under the smells of musk and roses. "We all do. That's what grief does to you. You're just learning. You're just beginning. It will change you. You'll never be the same."

The creature that was Susan—was still Susan, no matter what its form and voice—had pushed its way out the screen door, onto the porch, into moonlit Euclid Avenue. It was baying and growling. The neighbors' dog was barking crazily, and others around town were joining in. "We should go after her," Michelle protested. "Somebody will try to stop her, or call the police."

"She'll stay out of sight," Patty said.

The phone rang. Michelle gasped, gritted her teeth against the harsh repetitive clamor that was so like the sound of her own wailing and Faye's. Realizing finally that it wasn't stopping and no one was moving to answer it, she struggled to locate the source of the ringing, discovered a phone on an end table by the couch, and picked up the receiver. "Burns residence."

"Hello, is Michelle there?"

She couldn't think how to reply. She saw Faye in the doorway, nearly filling it, saw Faye's flesh spreading toward her across the floor, felt Faye's mind oozing into her own and finding too many empty spaces to fill. "Hi, Rick," she forced herself to say, trying not to remember that she had loved this man for years.

"Oh, Michelle, I didn't recognize your voice. We must have a bad connection. Are you all right? You didn't call."

"I'm sorry." *I'm sorry I'm so sorry Danny is dead*

"Are you having a good time?"

The question confused her, the implication that pleasure was possible. She couldn't hold this conversation in her mind long enough to participate. "Everybody's been so hurt," she finally said.

"Yes," he said. There was a long pause.

"Wendy and I are okay," she heard the voice in the receiver say, as if she'd inquired. "We miss you."

Someone else came into the room. Michelle didn't know who it was. Then she saw the pale hair and protruding teeth and realized it was Linda, moving now with energy and vivaciousness very different from the vivid weakness of before. Michelle heard her say to Faye, "Alice

Ann's husband came to get her. Said she had no business here. Said he needed her at home."

Faye said, "She's lucky to have somebody strong like that to tell her what to do. To keep her safe."

"Nobody else can keep you safe," Linda insisted. "You have to attack."

"You'll be home soon," said the voice on the phone.

"No."

Rick—so dear to her she couldn't encompass the terror of losing him—said, "What do you mean?"

"There is no home."

"There is. It's right here. Wendy and I are right here. We need you. We love you. Michelle."

"No."

"What are you saying? Are you saying we're not enough?"

Danny is dead everything will die everything is dead nothing can ever be enough I'm not enough

"Michelle?"

"Mom?"

For a burning instant, she thought it was Danny. "Wendy," she said, finding the right name.

"Hi, Mom. Hey, do you know where my red skirt is? I want to wear it to school tomorrow and I can't find it. There's this really cute guy—"

"I don't know." They were trying to reach her, to hold her. As if the telephone were a Ouija board, a crystal, a prayer. She didn't dare let herself be reached.

"Mom? I love you."

"I love you, too, Wendy," she was forced to say, and the truth of it terrified her. She had enough breath, could form enough words to say, "I have to go."

"Michelle?"

"I love you," she said, desperately, and fumbled the receiver back onto its cradle.

"We're going after Susan," Linda said. "We know where she goes."

Michelle was neither sitting on the floor nor lying nor standing upright. She had no sense of where her body was in space, where her mind was in relation to other minds, where her spirit was at all. From a slightly upward angle, then from just beneath the floor, then from between them—flitting, wandering—she watched the other women file past her.

Linda: vibrant in the half-light, beautiful, looking as if she'd just awakened from a refreshing sleep. Her white-blonde hair shone silver. Coral lipstick matched a flowing, brilliant coral shirt which in the sunlight had looked washed-out and baggy. She led them with strong, sure strides, and with a rapid wordless song.

Patty: An old woman, bent and cackling. A crawling baby. A little boy who looked a great deal like Danny but was gone before Michelle could call his name. A man with a gun.

Faye: Amoeba-like by now, arms and legs and head submerged into the vast flesh. Every motion forward was repeated and multiplied in motions sideways and backward, so that it seemed unlikely that she would move ahead at all, but her progress was quick. As she went past, a bulbous fjord of flesh and absorbent thought lapped at Michelle, took some of her away.

Without making any conscious decision, Michelle found herself following this strange, compelling procession.

They fanned out across the wide street and moved through the town where they'd all grown up. By now Michelle was almost completely insubstantial, having abandoned body and mind and spirit in the hope that no more pain could adhere to her. Indeed, she scarcely understood now what her pain was about, for pain had become its own reason. She forced herself to name what she'd lost. *Danny my son my child.*

She darted ahead and behind. She flitted into side streets quieter even than Euclid Avenue. She flew around darkened houses, many of which she might have recognized from her childhood; she slipped into some of them, where her presence caused people to stir uneasily in their sleep and have bad dreams.

Once in a while, she and Susan had gone to Sunday School in the square red Methodist Church here on the corner of Euclid Avenue and Church Streets. Vaguely, Michelle wondered what those young girls might have believed or wanted to believe, what prayers they'd said, what exorcisms. Like fog, like ghosts, she and the memory passed through each other.

The others went by the church: Linda swinging her arms vigorously and licking her lips; Patty an autumn leaf out of season, a lost child crying in a woman's voice; Faye leaving a slick trail she couldn't see along the sidewalk as she tried to absorb the footsteps and footprints of the others. Michelle went inside the church, through the peaked stained glass windows that barely scratched her with their glorious colors.

She rose up the belfry like smoke, breathed on the bells till they chimed thinly. She flickered among the pews. She circled the altar a few times, then was out again into the stained-glass moonlight. She had to keep moving. She couldn't rest; there would never again be a place for her to rest. She couldn't find peace, or reason, or Susan either. She knew she was moaning, and the moaning propelled her.

Finally she sped down the street without touching it and rejoined the others. They had nearly reached the elementary school. Michelle was aware that there were memories associated with the old school: the smell of the dusty, sunny brown classrooms; the rhythmic shriek of the swings on the playground; the metallic taste of the tepid water from the cooler in the hall. But these were memories in outline and in word only, with no sensory substance to them and no mind storing them anymore. They weren't hers.

The school lay long and beige in the moonlight. Windows in the front of the addition reflected Euclid Avenue. Michelle saw that she wasn't in that reflection, although Linda and Faye and Patty were, individually and in composite. Unless that wispy smudge was her reflection: discoloration made of ground glass, of disembodied pain.

In the reflection, Linda bent to sink her teeth into some indistinguishable part of Faye. The sight neither surprised nor dismayed Michelle. Blood spurted. Linda closed her eyes and moaned. Faye shrieked, like the swings on the playground.

Then Fay's body welled up around Linda's face, and for long moments the noises they made melded into a rhythmic sucking. Michelle imagined a limitless reservoir of human pain willing to assume any form. When at last they separated, they'd both altered a little more, and Patty grew up between them, a tree with glorious spreading branches and no roots.

"Does that help?" Michelle demanded of them all. Her voice echoed inside itself, and she wasn't sure that she'd spoken aloud, or that she needed to. "Does it help you bear the pain?"

"The pain is too much for any one person to bear." Patty was now standing on the curb, naked except for the white high-heeled sandals whose straps crawled up her calves. Michelle dimly noticed nipples, navel, pubic hair before a knee-length flowered sundress filled itself in. "But if you learn to change all the time, not to allow anything that's really your 'self,' then at least maybe it's harder for the pain to find you."

"But then you never really know who you are," Michelle protested, feebly and by rote.

"Who cares? Anyway, I know who I am. I'm somebody spending the rest of her life avoiding pain."

"Since I've learned how to feed off other people, color has come back into the world." Linda's hair was iridescent silver now, and scarlet pulsed from her lips and nails. "Otherwise I'd be living the rest of my life in monochrome since my bady died."

"But feeding off other people hurts them."

Linda shrugged, a dramatic and complex motion that set up ripples of color like an aura around her. "I've been hurt. You've been hurt. Why shouldn't we see to it that everybody else gets hurt, too? Besides, they always invite me in."

"What happened to your baby?" Michelle found herself asking.

Linda bared her teeth. Her tongue was sharp and red across them. "She was born with herpes. She died of it. They said she was a perfectly healthy normal baby up until the last two weeks, and the chance of this happening was so slim they never even warned me about it. Her little body was covered with sores. She got herpes from my blood. It's poison blood. She died because she shared my bloodstream. I can't risk having any more babies. But I won't die. I'll never die."

They were approaching Euclid Avenue's dead end with Water Street, the precise place where the prettiest street in the world stopped. Directly ahead was the nursing home, a white wood-frame cube. Off to the right was French Creek; the quality of sound across flowing water was slightly changed from the quality of sound across land.

Michelle sighed heavily, weary of noticing such detail, of taking tiny pleasure. The sigh didn't stop.

Faye's amorphous body spread over both streets. Its apertures and protuberances had little function now; she moved without feet, saw without eyes, clutched and sucked without eyes or a mouth. Thick pulpy fingers of her spirit and flesh insinuated themselves into Michelle's hollow thoughts and body cavities, penetrated and split them farther apart.

"It works for a while," Faye murmured. "You can absorb enough of another person to get through the day, or the hour. But then you get hungry again. And thirsty. And lonely. So lonely."

"There's Susan!" Linda lunged ahead.

Michelle had seen her, too, in the yard of the nursing home. Recognizably Susan, a stiff and trembling figure, furred by moonlight and by rage.

The others had obviously done this before. Michelle went along, blown from inside and outside like a dust devil or a waterspout. They circled around the end of the building, staying in shadow, and stopped under a first-floor window on the side facing the creek. Linda tapped on the glass with her curved crimson nails, waited, tapped again.

"Come in." An old frail voice from the other side of the window. A welcome that subtly changed the quality of what they were doing. Michelle noticed, and didn't want to. "I've been expecting you."

Linda lifted the window from its frame as though it had not been attached. Susan leaped through the opening. Patty, a black bird blending with the night, flew in. Faye groped her way up the wall, leaving parts of herself to mark her passage as slime and tendrils, completely filling the window for several seconds as she squeezed herself through. Linda took several long-legged steps and elegantly climbed in. Michelle didn't take note of her own passage; she was, simply, now inside the room, gathered with her friends around Miss Haemer's bed.

Michelle stared. Her gaze darted away, raced back. She would have known this woman to be Miss Haemer anywhere, even here on this stark and untended bed. The face was much older, had more planes and casts than before, but was the same face. The eyes recognized her. The mouth smiled and said her name as it had when she'd written her ghost love story: proudly, tenderly. "Hello, Michelle."

"Oh, Miss Haemer."

"I'm so glad you came to see me. The girls said they'd bring you to me." The atrophied limbs couldn't move, but Michelle took one of the hands as though she'd been beckoned to do so. The hand was warm and solid in hers; she closed her fingers around it, and they held.

A ghostly hand—hers, too—moved to pull the sheet up over Miss Haemer's body, to cover the terrible and beautiful human shapes of its shoulders and breasts and thighs. "Don't," Miss Haemer instructed, and the hand faded. "It's too hot."

"I hate to see you like this."

"I know, dear. But it's who I am."

Linda bent over her, touched her mouth to the withered neck. Miss Haemer pursed her lips in an answering kiss, but Linda had already straightened. "We thought if we all came together," Linda said, tossing her head in bright defiance, "maybe you'd listen to us."

"There's no reason for you to stay here like this," Patty said from her place in the photograph on the wall, "when you could turn into all sorts of other things."

"But, sweetheart, I'm content with who I am."

"You're in pain!" Susan howled.

"Yes."

"You're alone!"

"Yes."

"It's not fair!"

"It's not unfair either, honey. It just is. And it's all right."

"We could bring people to you," Faye said. It was not, Michelle understood, the first time the offer had been made, or the first time Miss Haemer had refused it with a shake of her head on the pillow. The pool Faye made on the floor glistened in the moonlight. "Or each of us could come and stay with you for a while and you could absorb what you need from us and then—"

Miss Haemer stopped the formless rushing of Faye's words by saying firmly, "I want all of you to leave now. I want to talk to Michelle alone."

There was a shocked silence, and then they all left as they'd come; Patty's wing brushed Michelle's hair, and Faye left a film on the wall and the window. Michelle still clutched Miss Haemer's hand, the strong articulated bones, the pliant flesh, and was now more frightened than she'd ever been of anything—even of Danny's death—by the thought of what this old woman might ask her to do.

"Come closer, dear."

Michelle took a step closer, sank onto the edge of the bed. The lowered bed rail pressed into the backs of her thighs. She brought her other hand to cup Miss Haemer's, and was seized by profound sorrow as she took note of the wrinkles and pores, the delicate skin, the white nails. It was a small hand, and she told herself to be reminded of Danny's hand in hers, but the comparison wouldn't hold; this was Miss Haemer's hand, and her own around it. Michelle was cold and sweating with terror.

"Come closer."

She stretched herself out on the bed. It was she who was being held as she took Miss Haemer in her arms, stroked as she drew her palms up and down the limp thin body. She was crying softly.

"I'm so sorry that your little boy died," Miss Haemer said.

"I miss him!"

"Yes."

"It hurts."

"It hurts a great deal."

"I'll never feel anything but this pain!"

"No, Michelle, that isn't true." Michelle caught her breath and drew back a little to look at Miss Haemer's face. The old eyes were on her. "Your life is abundant. And it's yours. You can live with the terrible loss of your child, or you can choose to lose everything else."

"It's hard!"

"The easy way is to do what the other girls have done. To make your life take on the shape of one thing only, one event only, one feeling. Susan has chosen anger. Faye has chosen emptiness."

"Danny is dead!"

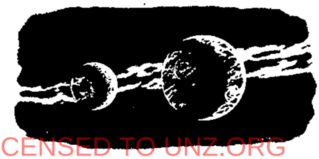
"Yes. And because Danny is dead you can change into something alien, or you can choose to stay human."

Something was taking form in the center of herself where there had been no core. She laid Miss Haemer's arms on her own body, and they were two women touching each other, two women alive. She looked into Miss Haemer's eyes and opened her own mouth and let the word come.

"Yes."

"You can accept it, dear. All of it. And you're transformed then into something more deeply human than before."

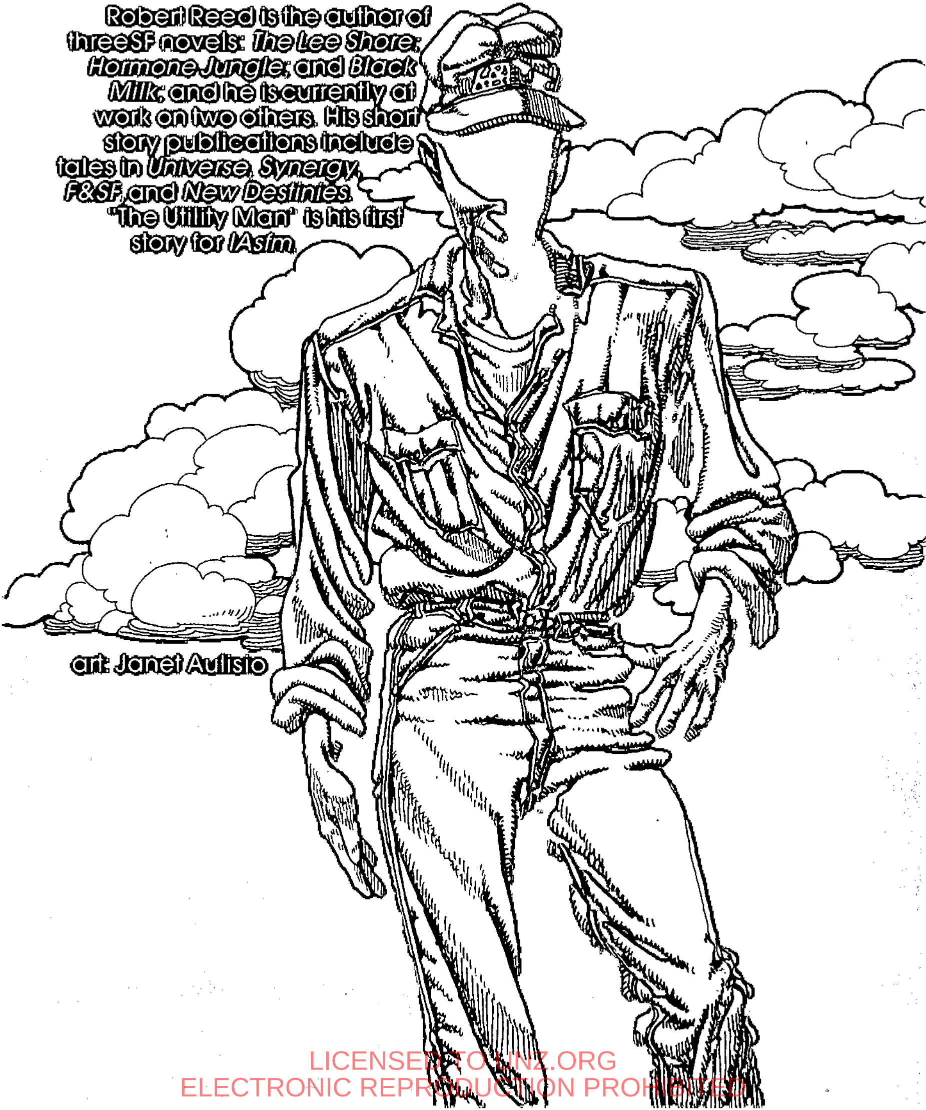
In a rush like the gathering home of souls, Michelle said again, *"Yes."* ●



THE UTILITY MAN

by Robert Reed

Robert Reed is the author of three SF novels: *The Lee Shore*; *Hormone Jungle*; and *Black Milk*; and he is currently at work on two others. His short story publications include tales in *Universe*, *Synergy*, *F&SF*, and *New Destinies*. "The Utility Man" is his first story for *IAsfm*.



art: Janet Aulisio

Most people stand up front and wait for the horn. It's Monday morning. Faces are long and tired, voices hoarse, and red eyes squint and water from too little of this. Too much of that. It's like any other Monday, except for two things. First, Miller is up front with the others. That's unusual. For the last three years, without exception, he's punched in and gone to the back of the plant. He's got his stuff back there, and he reads until the horn goes off. Books. It's always books with Miller. Except today, that is. He's sitting on a heavy worktable and staring at the door, his expression eager and strange. The second oddity is visible from where he's sitting. Out on the parking lot, on the dirty white gravel, waits a camera crew from the town's only TV station. The new employee is coming this morning. But what's the big fucking deal? some wonder. There's already a couple, three of *them* working in town. Right? It's been what? Two years since that big spiderweb of metal and glass pulled into orbit, and *they* came out. The aliens. Those toothless things from Tau Ceti. There's several million of them inside the starship, right? Miller would know how many. He's got a thing about the aliens. A couple of people consider asking Miller some questions, giving him the chance to talk about what he knows. Only that's dangerous. He might not shut up. God, they think, look at him. He looks like a kid at Christmas. All eager and ready. They think, So what the fuck if the government's giving us an alien? A lot of businesses are getting them. Some sort of get-to-know-each-other nonsense, right? It's been on TV from the first, and everyone understands the basics of the thing. And nobody wants to get excited like Miller. No, they know better. All the good these aliens are supposed to do for people, people everywhere, but they want to wait and see. To keep a rein on things. Pretend it's any Monday, they tell themselves. Ignore Miller and just wait for the damned horn.

The horn screams. Miller jerks and looks at the clock; then he turns, reluctant and slow, and hopes against hope that he can work up front today. Up where he can watch for the Cetian.

Only the foreman comes over to him. He's a tall, beefy man with a fringe of dirty-blond hair, and he tells Miller that so-and-so is gone and he's got to be on the line for now. With Jacob. "Sure," says Miller. "Okay." He's the utility man. He plugs holes during vacations and drunks and whatnot. He's worked here for three years, ever since he last quit school, and he does every job in the plant without complaints. Without lapses. Miller is a small man, young-looking but with lines starting to show on his face. Around his eyes and mouth. He has the kind of face that moves from adolescence into middle-age without once looking thirty; and his expressions tend to compound the illusion of youth. Dreamy. Distracted. A little lost, perhaps.

He's a prideful sort of fellow. The pride shows whenever he smiles and shakes his head at this or that.

People don't like Miller. As a rule.

It isn't any one thing. There are others in the plant with smug attitudes. And others who keep to themselves in their free time. A couple people even have college degrees. (Miller doesn't. But he's close in three different majors.) Yet nobody puts together these traits quite like he does. The book reading, the know-it-all voice. And beside, Miller is a prude. An incredible prude. He's not married, but he doesn't talk like any normal bachelor. Off-color jokes and conquest stories embarrass him. Nor does he drink or smoke weed. People have learned to tease him about these things. It's something of a game to them. They like to make him red-faced and crazy, seeing how far they can push him. For the fun of it. "You get any last night, Miller? Huh?" He hates that talk. "Come with us at lunch, Miller. Get high. What do you say, huh? Come down from that pulpit and let's have some fun."

Fun. They call that fun, thinks Miller. Imagine!

It's the worst thing about working here—listening to the harsh, frank chatter about pussy and dope. Miller's outside life is nobody else's business, he figures. He guards his privacy every moment. Every day. That's one of his prides. He has strict, solid values and he won't make compromises. Never. After all, he tells himself, he's not part of this place. He doesn't really belong here, and he has no intention of letting this place rub off on him. Or wound him. Not even when he goes to the toilet and reads what people have written on the walls—the Fag Professor and Virgin Miller and the rest of it. He tells himself to ignore it. He won't stoop to their garbage. Sure, he gets angry. Furious, even. But the pay here is good, and he can read while he works. At least sometimes. And most of the time, most days, they leave him alone. Which is fine.

They don't matter, after all.

He's going to make something of his life. Absolutely. He's told them that in a hundred different ways, a thousand times. Just as soon as he saves enough money, he's quitting this dump and heading back to school.

The alien arrives a few minutes after eight, delayed by who-knows-what. He's probably driving his own car, Miller knows. Something suitable. A used car purchased at one of the local lots. Something a factory worker would buy for a thousand dollars, worn tires and dripping oil but otherwise sound.

That's the way they operate.

The Cetians are coming to work and live among human beings, doing their surveying firsthand. That's what this is all about. The Cetians have a master plan, and they've explained it to all the world's nations. From the United States to Chad. They are here to dispense knowledge. An ancient race, they are wise beyond human understanding. Their technologies are eerie, almost magical, and some of them will be turned over in time. Their stardrive, for instance. And their closed ecosystems. Metallurgy. Architecture. And so on. But first they need to learn about the human species. All its facets, weaknesses and strengths. They've done this kind of thing with other alien races. Miller has read every official account. The Cetians are masters of this business. By studying a species from the inside out, they can dispense their gifts without fear of causing massive disruptions. Indeed, thinks Miller, they'll come to understand people better than people do. Maybe that'll be their greatest gift, he tells himself. And he smiles. They'll teach us about ourselves, he thinks. They're going to show us the way to peace and happiness.

Miller has studied the Cetians since their arrival—their starship a glittering webwork rushing from deep space. "They're millions of years older than us," he mutters. He's working across the table from a small pudgy black man. Jacob. "They're part of the great galactic community," he says to himself. "Hundreds of thousands of worlds. . . ."

"What's that?" asks Jacob. "What're you mumbling?"

Miller blinks and says, "Nothing." He looks at Jacob for an instant. Then there's motion in the aisle, and he turns his head and sees a cameraman walking backward, a spotlight perched on a pole rising over his head. The alien is nearby. The emissary from the stars. Miller feels a tightness in his throat. He's full of emotion. This won't be the first Cetian he has seen, not hardly; but still and all, he can barely contain himself.

"Hey, Einstein," shouts Jacob. "Get that up here. Here!"

A wooden frame is on the end of the belt, only partway up on the big tabletop. Miller sighs and does what he has to do. Doesn't Jacob see what's happening? Who understands besides him? Sometimes he feels ashamed by everyone's lack of enthusiasm. By their sheer indifference. He wonders why any alien race, saintly or not, would waste precious time in trying to educate mankind. The earth doesn't deserve the attention, he believes. It has too little imagination, too much stupidity, and he feels like shouting his opinions for the passing camera. Let everyone hear the truth. . . .

"Would ya fucking watch what you're fucking doing?"

Miller blinks and apologizes. He pushes the frame into position and Jacob uses an airgun, pounding long staples into the pine with a slick, liquid motion. Jacob is famous for his thoroughness. His efficiency. He takes the frame and pushes it onto the next belt, and the next frame is already here and waiting. The alien is coming down the aisle, but Miller doesn't have time for more than a quick glance or two. He notices the human shape with the milky white skin—skin that can change into grey or black or even become clear. At will. They're beautiful, he knows. Remarkable entities. No real teeth, but a complex gizzard in place of enamel. No hair, but wearing thoroughly human clothes and not looking the least bit silly. This Cetian has faded jeans and a pale blue workshirt, plus running shoes. Miller glances again. He sees a cap riding the smooth hairless head, its brim tilted up and some seed company's emblem riding above the brim. Very natural. Very *right*. If it wasn't for the cameras and the crowd, he thinks, the figure might be anyone. It's a little bit unnerving to see how easily the Cetian fits in.

Half of the front office is helping to give a tour of the plant. For the camera. They're the ones who look misplaced, what with their suits and ties and polished leather shoes. Miller has to concentrate on his job; he can't watch the group as it moves, lingers, then moves again. He's talking to the Cetian whenever he can. In his head. And the imaginary alien asks him how he came to be here. A person of his interests, of his training, seems wasted in this place. I needed the money, Miller explains. It's just the way things fell together, you know? But the alien doesn't understand, no. So Miller, speaking inside his head, tells half of his life story. It doesn't answer everything, but he tells it with all the vigor he can muster. As if he's practicing for later. For the conversations to come.

The imaginary Cetian smiles in his peculiar fashion—the beak-like lips parting and the violet tongue showing against the roof of his mouth. Then he compliments Miller in glowing terms, telling him that he's bright and articulate, and so on. A good thing I found you, the Cetian declares. I thought I might be lonely while I'm here. And bored. But now I've got you for a friend . . . a soul-mate. . . .

"Hey! You alive, Miller?"

Miller is behind again. He apologizes to Jacob and lifts the next frame making dead certain that it's properly aligned.

And the next one too.

And the next.

People from the office begin to file past them, and the news people. Their jobs are done. Smiles and amiable chatter mean everything has gone well. Miller concentrates on his job. Eventually the foreman wanders past. He's alone, smoking and looking generally pissed at the world. Miller remembers how last week, hearing that they were getting a Cetian, the foreman had moaned something about not wanting or needing one of those goddamn chameleons. Fuck gifts from the stars and all that shit. He had a business to run. Product to get out. If he couldn't fucking hire who he wanted, then screw all the suits and their goddamn offices too—

Miller stands on his toes for a moment, looking down the line.

The Cetian is standing at the line's end. In the plant's hierarchy, that's one of the worst jobs. The Cetian and a scruffy man are pulling the finished frames from the belt and stacking them on pallets. But what else are they doing? he wonders. Talking? The scruffy man is a drunk, Miller knows. He didn't get past ninth grade, and he's been to prison how many times? For stupid crimes. For drugs. He's probably still stoned, Miller realizes. Red-eyed and wobbly. Yet the Cetian is talking to him, and he's answering. They're having a conversation—?

There comes a sudden, wood-splitting *crash*.

"Goddamn you!" shouts Jacob. He aims the airgun at Miller's chest. "Pull your head out of your ass, Professor. The chameleon will keep, for God's sake! So let's get busy. What do you say? Huh?"

There's a horn for the morning break—fifteen minutes of rest, minus walking time. Most people go back up front, up to where the vending machines are stacked along the concrete walls. They settle down to play cards and nap on the golden stacks of lumber. And there's the talk, the constant talk, about tits and asses and blow and beer.

Normally Miller goes the other way. He has a corner, quiet and out of the way, where he keeps his lunch and books and a comfortable seat he made for himself out of scrap lumber. Sometimes when he's reading he finds a sentence or a little paragraph that he likes, and he uses a marking pen to copy it on the concrete walls. For future reference. Today, hearing the break horn, Miller's first thought is that the Cetian might wander back to his corner and pause, reading some of the carefully written wisdoms. Yes? They're from great novels and classic works of science—the crowns of human achievement. It's such a wonderful image, the Cetian and him meeting in that corner. So wonderful that Miller almost expects it to happen. He's got it all planned.

Except the Cetian doesn't know the plan. He comes forward with the general flow of bodies. It's unnerving to watch him. He seems to carry himself like any new employee. There's a tentativeness, a calculated caution in the eyes—flat and square, in this case, with tiny triangular pupils the color of new snow—and the caution extends to everyone around him. Maybe these people are scared, thinks Miller. I'm not scared, he tells himself. This is an opportunity, rare and remarkable. Miller feels singularly suited to act as a bridge between the two sides. A rush of adrenalin pours through him. He climbs under the belt and joins the flow of bodies, and it's all he can do to keep from jogging after the Cetian and calling to him. Like some long lost friend.

They're amazing, really. These aliens.

In Asia, Cetians dress in peasant clothes and enormous straw hats, bending over and shuffling through the flooded rice paddies. In Australia, in the dusty outback, they drive little 4×4 pickups while they do the simple ranchwork like Abos do. In Europe, odd as it sounds, Cetians are among the protestors marching against imperialism and environmental decay; and they're also the police wearing riot gear and standing in rows, defending order and the state.

These ironies are abundant and somehow comforting.

There is a sense of utter fairness in the process.

Cetians will undergo almost anything to learn about mankind first-hand—some even dying—and Miller has to wonder how many of his co-workers appreciate their earnestness, their good intentions. He doubts any of them do. Probably not one, he thinks.

It must be lonely, dull work for them.

Miller knows.

A Cetian would welcome a friend, sure. Someone who appreciates the age and depth of the Cetian culture. Miller sees the odd white figure sitting alone on a lumber stack, the square eyes watching a cluster of men playing poker on a little table. Miller breathes and sits on the same stack, not too close but near enough that they could talk. If they want. He glances at the odd eyes and the white, white skin. What should I say? he wonders. Why am I so nervous? I shouldn't be nervous, he tells himself. His hands shake in his lap. A couple of poker players glance up at him and smile, then they mutter something rude. No doubt. Again Miller breathes, finding a quick courage. "Hello?" He sees all of the Cetian face, blank and so strange. He offers his name and smiles, extending one of his nervous hands.

The square eyes blink in slow motion. "I'm Rozz," says the Cetian, the voice deep and liquid and amazingly human. One of Rozz's four-fingered hands grabs Miller's hand, squeezing and feeling like plastic. It's smooth and cool and tough. Like plastic. Or maybe teflon.

"Hey," says Miller, "it's great you're here. I mean it. Everywhere, I mean." He feels clumsy, his mouth spitting words at random. "I just really think it's neat."

Rozz blinks again, no expression to be read.

Miller hears a poker player laughing. Maybe at him. He gulps and tells the Cetian, "This isn't much to look at, I know," and then he looks about, his own face critical but tolerant. "Did they show you everything? I mean, do you have questions? Because I might answer them. I mean, I've been here quite awhile." He feels giddy now. He tells himself that he's doing too much, he wants too much, but all he can do is listen to his own prattle. "Years," he says. "I mean, if you want to get a feel for this place and all—"

The poker table erupts in laughter. Miller jerks, not having heard what was said but imagining several things. Something tasteless and pointed at him, no doubt. Then he looks at Rozz, ready to deny anything.

The Cetian is now focused on the little table—raw pine scraps stapled together—and the hunched-over bodies with cigarettes in their laughing mouths and the cards tight in their hands. Maybe fifty cents in nickels and dimes are in the middle. Everyone is looking at the alien. The laughter diminishes. Something wary and alert comes into their faces. For a long moment, nothing happens. Then Rozz says with a slow, precise voice:

"Five-card draw."

A couple players blink as if surprised. Someone asks, "You know it? The game?"

Rozz lifts a hand, flattens it and wiggles it in the air. "A little bit," he seems to imply. "I'm not so good," he says aloud. "But I can play."

The men look at one another, not sure what to make of things. It's the foreman, sitting with his back to Rozz, who announces, "This is an open game, I guess. Anyone who wants to join, joins."

Rozz drops off the stack, leaving Miller without a good-bye glance. One of the players moves aside, giving up most of a long bench, and Rozz sits and watches a new hand being laid out. No one looks comfortable. They're judging him, thinks Miller. This is some test. Rozz picks up the five cards and finds a nickel in his front pocket, putting it into the new pot. Then he draws three cards, adds a second nickel, and loses with a pair of tens. The game couldn't be any quieter. They play again, a couple more hands, and everyone is sneaking looks at the hard plastic-like skin, at the square eyes, at the beaked and toothless mouth. Rozz pays no attention to them, and Miller stays on the stack, still marveling. An ancient race which has traveled around the galaxy, to countless wonderful places, and yet their representative has the charity and poise to sit with a backward race. A hard and graceless race. Us.

At one point, his voice cracking, Miller asks, "How's it going, Rozz? How are we doing?"

Rozz looks at him, maybe smiling. "Not too fucking bad," he declares. "Not bad at all." And he lays down the winning hand, grinning in a very human fashion, sweeping in the nickels while the other players stare, almost laughing, a few of them nodding as if they've seen something and it's something they might like.

Through the rest of the morning, Miller writes little notes on the golden wood of the frames. He uses a black marker. The frames are going to be painted, so there's no damage done. Then the belt carries them and his notes on down the line, straight to Rozz.

"The Cetian earth," he scribbles, "is tropical and wet and covered with lemon-colored vegetation." He hopes Rozz will be impressed with his interest. "Its largest creature is a fish-analog, one hundred tons, semi-intelligent and peaceful and worshipped by the ancient Cetians." He has to write quickly, trying Jacob's patience. He wants Rozz to respond somehow, but he can't even tell if his new friend is reading the notes. "Cetian starships are powered by matter-antimatter engines, both fuels derived from the interstellar medium." The message is broken up on several frames. Still no response. No wave or smile. Nothing. "I'm interested in you," he writes finally. "And I admire your culture."

This time Rozz looks down the line and nods. Once.

Miller is excited. He looks at his watch, thinking hard. It's close to noon. "Eat with me?" he writes. "Miller." Then he waits, watching the frame travel to the end. To *him.*

But the Cetian doesn't respond. He seems to read it, yes, but then there's the horn and he's walking down the aisle, down past Miller and gone. Jacob wants to finish the frame on the table. Maybe Rozz didn't understand? thinks Miller. Maybe I should have told him where? Still optimistic, he hurries back to his corner and gets a certain book—a recently published guide to Cetian myths and legends—plus his lunch pail. But when he's up front, trotting toward the time clock, he discovers the Cetian sitting snugly between the foreman and another one of the poker players.

Disappointment starts to nag at him.

He punches out and returns. The three figures are sharing a stack of lumber. The humans eat from pails—sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs and sweating pop cans within easy reach. Rozz has a crumpled grocery sack behind him and a cellophane bag of unshelled, unsalted peanuts in one hand. No one is talking, but the humans watch the peanuts being flipped up into the mouth two at a time. Rozz doesn't chew; he only swallows. His pace is amazing. The foreman shakes his head and smiles. Miller settles at the poker table, barely hungry but pretending to chew on his sandwich. While he watches.

He feels cheated.

Coming here this morning, he had expectations. They'd been building since last week's announcement. It was the prospect of a *friend*—someone he could respect, and talk to, and learn from. Not another sweatshop goon full of harsh talk and ugly humor. But someone of culture, of learning. Someone who had been to odd and wondrous places beyond human reach. Someone he could share breaks with, and lunchtime, the two of them talking and talking and talking—

Miller bristles, thinking he might have been wrong.

He sets down his lunchmeat sandwich, his stomach churning and his breath tasting foul. The foreman asks Rozz, "So how do you do it?" and Miller waits. "Like I've seen on TV—?"

"A gizzard," Rozz answers, his tone matter-of-fact. Patient. "You know, like a chicken's gizzard? It's lined with rocks that grind up the shells, and I shit out what my body can't use."

"Huh," says the foreman. "Huh!"

"Do you want to see it?"

"What? Your gizzard?" The foreman halfway shudders, surprised.

"You've seen 'em, Pete," says the other man. "They do it on TV."

Rozz unbuttons the blue cotton shirt, exposing the white chest with its narrow, widely spaced ribs. Maybe he's smiling. Miller shifts on the hard wooden seat and watches, his thoughts jumbled. A look of utter calm comes into Rozz's face, and the whiteness weakens like milk being flooded with water. A large yellow heart, six chambers and a tangle of thick arteries and veins, is set within the long pale ribs. The gizzard is the darker bundle of round muscle beneath the heart. Miller recognizes it from all the science articles. He feels an urge to stand and point out organs, lecturing. "This is where the peanuts are now." But Rozz himself points, telling them the same thing. Then, as if to display his talents, the gizzard contracts with a sudden violence. Shells crumble and the two men give a little jump, then they shake their heads and laugh, looking at one another as if to congratulate themselves on their courage.

"All right," says Pete, the foreman. "With rocks, you say?"

Rozz turns white again, and he smiles again. "Here. Watch this." He reaches into the grocery sack and retrieves a single black walnut, rough against the smooth skin of the hand. "Watch," he cautions. The nut vanishes into his mouth, and he swallows in a theoretical way; and with Miller eating again, unnoticed and still glowering at all of them, the walnut shatters somewhere inside the Cetian's belly. It's like a little explosion. The men jump and then giggle, then turn and look around the plant, hunting for someone to show the marvel they've just found.

Rozz is moved off the line after lunch. The foreman wants him up front, up in Assembly, which is pretty much the easiest department. It's where the foreman spends most of his day. What's going on? Miller wonders. He feels betrayed and rather jealous. And maybe foolish, too. All the time he'd been building this image of the Cetians, and all the time he'd been so blind. The Cetians fit into all kinds of places, with anyone. It never occurred to him that they actually *enjoyed it!* Now the blood roars in his head and his fingers shake. He can scarcely think, barely able to do his job. Jacob glares at him several times, shaking his head but too weary to shout. Miller counts the minutes till afternoon break, the halfway point, because everything afterward will be quick. The day and the craziness will be over soon after break. Then he'll have time to go home and collect himself, to sleep and relax and get it all straight in his head.

When the break horn sounds, Miller decides a Coke would taste good.

By the time he's up front, the poker players are at it. Rozz is among them. Miller pauses and stands nearby, just watching, and then something unexpected occurs to him. Why not? he asks himself. It's an open game, isn't it? There's an empty seat. Miller takes it and looks straight across at the Cetian, waiting, feeling tight inside while he watches the white hands shuffling the deck like a pro.

How does he do it? Miller wonders. Did he practice before coming here? Or does he just pick it up along the way? Card games. The language. All of it. The humans watch Miller while Rozz deals. Miller isn't sure how to bet. He throws a nickel into the pot, takes three cards, and loses with a pair of fours. The foreman wins, grinning at Miller and sweeping up the coins. He says, "So what's the occasion? Thought you'd be social for a change?"

Miller doesn't know what he's thinking. He opens his mouth as if to answer, but nothing comes to mind.

The foreman is amused. Still smiling, he turns to another man and asks, "Have you seen what the new guy can do, Ed? Have you?"

"What do you mean?" Ed works in the paint department—an ancient simpleton with a partial beard and spooked eyes. He glances at Rozz, unsure of himself. "What can he do?" he manages. "Tell me."

"Would you?" says the foreman. "You mind?"

Rozz shrugs. No, he doesn't mind. His skin immediately turns black, like coal. Someone up on the stacks yells, "Hey, he looks like Jacob! Don't he?"

A lot of them laugh.

The foreman laughs. "But it's the other thing I wanted."

"God, I don't want to see!" Ed shivers. "Why the fuck would anyone do that to himself? I mean . . . Jesus. . . .!"

"For camouflage," Miller responds. He says, "They do it so they can hide," and nods, glad to have spoken. To throw in his knowledge.

But no one is listening to him. Except Ed. And Ed doesn't like what he hears. "So how come he's not colored? You know. Green and all? Those fucking lizards are green and brown and shit. Right?"

"Cetians are color-blind." Miller smiles. He's sorting his next hand without looking at his cards, telling everyone, "They see the world in black and white and grey. Like cheap TV."

Only Ed listens, his mouth opened and his expression befuddled. The rest of the table, Rozz included, studies the cards and Ed and the little piles of change out in front of them. They aren't going to let him take part in this. Not if they can help it. Someone up on the stacks says something, probably about Miller, and he hears men chuckling. It was funny to them. He can imagine what they just said.

Nickels are tossed into the pot.

Miller glances at his cards once, then catches Rozz staring at him. The square eyes are cold and a little bit unnerving. He shifts his weight, feeling the hard wood against his butt. There's more betting and he loses again. Rozz wins. Reaching for the pot, he makes the skin of his hands turn transparent. Everyone can see his colorless meat and the fine yellow bones, and almost everyone laughs. Except for Miller and Ed. "Would you fucking stop that?" says Ed. "Goddamn, you're nuts. Can all of you . . . you people do that? Can you?"

"You should have seen him at lunch," the foreman confides. "We looked in on Rozz's heart, didn't we?" Everyone nods. Poker has been temporarily forgotten. "And his gizzard. And his guts."

"I don't want to see any guts," says Ed, emphatic. He waves his large calloused hands, telling the Cetian, "I don't even like *thinking* about that stuff."

Rozz shrugs.

The foreman says, "Do it in the face. Can you do it there?" He asks, "Can you make your face go clear?"

"Sure." Rozz seems unperturbed. Amused, even.

Ed says, "No, no, no! I can't stand this shit."

The foreman waves to the men on the stacks. "Come on over. Old Rozz is going to give us a show."

They drop from the stacks, giggling and trotting over and forming a clumsy horseshoe around the poker table. Miller doesn't know what to do. He feels small and absolutely unnoticed, picking at his cards and trying to focus on their blurred figures.

People start to applaud.

He jerks and looks. He has to look. He's startled by the yellow skull—eye sockets cubic and the tongue curled against the mouth's roof and pale muscles making the small jaw move, Rozz saying, "Look, Ma. No face!"

The men start to howl. Someone says, "What's the matter, Ed? Hey! You don't look so good!"

Ed's face has turned pale. His hands push the coins and cards away from him. "I can't take it," he squeals. "You guys—!"

"What's wrong, Ed?"

"Why the hell does he have to do that? Why?" he wondered. "I don't see why he's got to turn to glass!"

Miller knows. He touches Ed and says, "It's because of sex," with a very serious, utterly sober voice.

The table turns quiet.

Rozz turns white again, watching Miller.

Ed turns his head and looks lost. "What do you mean? What's sex got to do with it?"

No one admits they're listening, but no one makes a sound. Not the foreman. Not any of them. Miller says, "It's like with birds. Birds have bright plumage so they can show potential mates they're healthy. Strong. Virile. Cetians do the same thing by making themselves transparent. It's a very private thing." And he pauses. "Normally. It's to show their mate that they don't have internal parasites. No diseases. Nothing bad or out of place." He breathes and puts his own cards on top of the mess, feeling every eye and relishing the attention. These stupid jerks, he's thinking. And he means *all* of them. He glares at Rozz as if accusing him of some failure, some wicked crime, and he crosses his arms on his chest and says nothing more.

Says Rozz, "What do you know?"

Eyes shift to the Cetian.

"He's right, you know." Rozz nods, telling them, "When I go to bed with a girl, I really undress."

A few men laugh, uneasily.

Rozz grabs the scattered cards, arranging and then shuffling the deck. Everyone takes back their old bets. Rozz deals. When he starts to throw in a nickel, by accident, he knocks other coins to the floor. So he bends and vanishes under the table for a moment. The men are glaring at Miller. One of them says, "Professor Perfect," and several of them are laughing.

Rozz returns. The hand is finished in tense silence. Miller wins sixty-five cents with three aces, but he doesn't care. It means nothing. He's halfway tempted to leave the pot, proving his scorn for everyone. The alien is manipulating the crowd, he senses. But not me! The horn sounds, and everyone is standing. Miller starts to pocket his winnings regardless, and there comes a sudden stillness. What's happening? He notices how everyone else is looking at the floor, at his feet, and he looks down and spots a single card on the floor. A fourth ace right beneath his seat.

Says the foreman, "What's this?"

Miller looks at the smiling alien.

"What're you doing?" asks the foreman. "Cheating us for change?"

They're all watching him, waiting, their expressions stern and maybe angry. Maybe not. He's having trouble reading their faces. "I didn't do this," he argues. "I mean, you can't really believe. . . .!"

Rozz shakes his head as if supremely disappointed.

"It's you!" shouts Miller. "You put that there, didn't you?"

"Did I?" asks Rozz.

Miller moves towards him. "When you went under the table, you did it! Didn't you?"

"Gosh," says the foreman. "That's a pretty strong accusation, Miller. I hope you can back it up."

"Someone must have seen him do it." Miller pivots, wanting a witness to step forward. "Who saw him put the card there—?"

Nobody says, "Me."

Miller faces the Cetian again, waiting for a moment. Then he leaps. He shoves a handful of nickels into the bastard's face, right at its beaked mouth, shouting, "They're yours, goddamn you! You eat them! Now!" He says, "Line your goddamn gizzard with these, you shit!"

The men pull him off Rozz.

The foreman and another man, stern-faced and certain, march him into the little glass-walled office where the plant manager holds court. He isn't here just now. The other man goes to find him. The foreman shakes his head and says nothing. His arms are crossed on his chest.

"I didn't do it," Miller manages to say.

"I know," says the foreman. "We all know that. Rozz was just having fun with you. It was just a joke, you idiot."

Miller can barely hear him. He's looking out into the plant, into Assembly. A group of men are standing in a circle, talking to Rozz. He's so far away that he looks human. The jeans, the shirt, the seed cap. Even his motions are true. It occurs to Miller that the alien is genuinely fitting into this place. All the Cetians fit in. To them this isn't a chore, it's a joy. They wear humanity like you would a new suit—

"What's happening out there?" asks the foreman.

Miller can't tell for certain.

"Stay here. I'll be back." He shuts the door and stalks out into the plant. The men don't see him approaching. They're engrossed with whatever Rozz is telling them, both of Rozz's hands above his head, eyes wide, the hands implying some epic tale of great drama and worth.

The foreman breaks it up.

Miller watches everyone get back to work. He sees Rozz talking to the foreman and glancing towards the office. Then the foreman returns. "He gave me a message. He wants you to know something."

Miller asks, "What?"

"He said he's been sizing you up—"

"Yeah?"

"—and he doesn't like your insides."

Miller has no response. He presses his face to the glass and sighs, feeling nothing, his thoughts jumbled and slow. What I'll have to do first, he thinks, is get my stuff out of that corner. The books and the rest of it that I want. Then he remembers the quotes on the walls and wishes there was some way he could take them too. But there's not, of course. They're there. That's where they'll have to stay. ●

Andrew Weiner is currently at work on his second novel—tentatively titled—*Downside.* Mr. Weiner's first novel, *Station Gehenna,* was released in paperback by Worldwide Press in 1988. Early this years, Porcépic Press brought out his collection *Distant Signals and other Stones.* Mr.Weiner tells us that while the following story was inspired by the rock 'n' roll industry, the tale is really about all the one-hit wonders that occur in art and in life.

ETERNITY, BABY

by Andrew Weiner

art: Linda Burr

1.

When he was seventeen years old, Simon Nagel fell in love, at first sight and quite hopelessly, with Elena Layton.

Elena was Gil Daniels' girlfriend. Simon and Gil played together in the same rock band, the Avenging Angels. This was 1965, and John Tomalski, the lead singer, had a thing about "The Avengers" TV show, or anyway a thing about Diana Rigg. They played all the usual places: high school dances, bowling alleys, sweet sixteens. They were quite good, although highly derivative.

Simon was the keyboards player, and the youngest Angel. Like John, he was still in high school. Gil, the bass player, sold shoes in a factory outlet; Phil Stein, the drummer, was in his first year of college; and Davie Stanton, the lead guitarist, was an apprentice graphic artist. All of them still lived with their parents in the town of Roselle, New Jersey.

The day Simon met Elena, the band was rehearsing in his parents' cavernous rec room. Or at least, they would have been rehearsing, if Gil had not been late yet again.

"We ought to tell him to take a walk," said Phil. "Who needs this shit?"

"Right," John said. "Who needs it?"

"Kick him out on his butt," agreed Davie, running his fingers through his mane of blond hair.

But of course they never would. John was the lead singer, Davie the one who made the little girls swoon. But Gil, at best an indifferent musician, with a craggy, lived-in face more suited to a meatpacker than a rock 'n' roll hero, was somehow crucial to the band all the same. Gil was simply the hippest kid in town: the best dresser, the best dancer, the best-connected when it came to scoring grass or pills. No one was going to tell Gil to take a walk.

Simon's position in the band, on the other hand, was tenuous at best. None of them, except John, had really wanted him in the first place. And even John, a friend going back to sandbox days, often seemed embarrassed to have him around.

At school Simon was pretty much a loner: nervous, intense, high-strung. But he was an excellent musician. He had been taking music lessons for years, and he could play almost anything, classical, jazz, or rock. He could even read music.

The clinching factor, though, was that Simon's parents would let them rehearse in their rec room, rehearse at all hours and volume levels.

Simon's parents almost always let him have what he wanted, anything except attention. Growing up, most of the time he felt that he was pretty well invisible. Even on stage he felt that way. But in a sense it was an asset, being invisible. Otherwise he would have been too paralyzed with fright to perform at all.

When the doorbell rang, Simon climbed the stairs from the basement to answer it. There was no one else home. Simon's parents were away visiting his married sister in Philadelphia, which was just as well because Gil was holding a joint as big as a cigar in his hand.

"Hey, man . . . " Simon started to protest, and then he saw Elena coming up behind Gil on the steps to the front door, her bright red cloak streaming behind her. He fell for her in that moment.

"This is Elena," Gil told Simon. "She's come to watch us a while. She's a dancer."

Elena Layton had just turned nineteen. She was living at home and taking dance classes in the city and her ambition was to be a professional dancer. She never would become one, but she *looked* like a dancer, or how Simon thought a dancer should look, and so he would shortly immortalize her.

"Hi," Simon croaked.

"Hello," Elena said. She shook back the long dark hair from her eyes and smiled at him.

"Come in," Simon said.

Simon wondered what had happened to Cheryl, Gil's previous girlfriend. But Gil was always running through girlfriends. Gil had a way with women, a way that Simon desperately envied.

"So how's it coming, kid?" Gil asked.

"We were waiting for you."

"Well," Gil said. "No way you could manage without me, right?"

And so Elena sat down on the old beat-up couch at the other end of the rec room and watched them rehearse for a while.

Simon hunched down over the piano, and tried to avoid looking at Elena, but again and again he found his eyes drawn back towards her. And then he looked up from the keyboard to find her looking directly at him. For a moment their eyes locked, and she gave him a half-smile.

He tore his eyes away, but not before something very much like an electric shock surged right through him. And in that moment he began to hear a song playing in his head, as if on some spectral radio show. A song about Elena.

When they had finished rehearsing, Elena complimented them on their performance and went off with Gil. Then the others drifted off, and Simon sat down at the piano to write the song about Elena that had burst into his head. And after that one, another song, different but from the same place.

He had written songs before, but they had never satisfied him. These new songs, he could already hear them complete, every guitar part, every bass line, every chorus. And he knew that they were perfect.

He stayed up all night writing them down, the songs that would earn the Avenging Angels their brief footnote in the history of rock, the anthems of teen *angst* that would make them half-famous for a few months of the following year, *Dance Miranda* and *Oh Melanie*.

Dance Miranda was the one that would go all the way up to number one on the *Billboard* charts. *Oh Melanie,* the follow-up, would barely make the top twenty. But Simon liked them both equally. And both of them were about Elena: not so much the real Elena, who he hardly knew, as his idea of her, and his hopeless love for that idea.

* * *

2.

Simon never told Elena that he had written the songs about her. But he did let it slip once to John, and pretty soon everyone in the band knew about it. He took some ribbing for it, but less than he might have expected, because everyone could tell that the songs were magical, and suddenly they were all a little in awe of him.

Maybe someone told Elena, and maybe not. But she was always friendly to him, when she came to see the band perform. And at the New Year's Eve party at Davie's she kissed him with a lot of warmth, although she kissed a lot of guys there, and anyway she was more than a little drunk on Davie's punch.

Soon after that Gil and Elena must have had a falling-out, because suddenly Gil had a new girlfriend, Sharon, and Elena didn't come around to watch them play anymore. Simon thought about calling her, but he never had the nerve. She was just too exotic for him, too infinitely mysterious; he could not aspire to actually knowing her.

He still thought about Elena, but less so as time went by. He was just too busy, working almost every night now with the band, rehearsing or playing gigs or making demoes of his songs, and working desperately by day not to flunk out at school.

And then their first record broke the charts wide open, and the rest of his life began. The way it happened was that Phil Stein's father was a jazz writer for one of the major music trade magazines. He was well-connected in the music business. He had helped them shop around the demoes of Simon's songs until they got a deal.

It was a lousy deal, as it later turned out. They would never see a penny from the recording company beyond the initial advance. But it was a deal all the same, and at the time everyone was thrilled. Even more so when *Dance Miranda,* with its tricky contrapuntal rhythms and achingly wistful chorus, started to get major airplay.

Wealth and fame, or anyway fame, beckoned. And after lengthy discussions with their various parents, some more heated than others, they turned professional and hit the road.

Simon had just finished high school. The expectation in his family had been that he would go to college, eventually to become a lawyer like his father. His parents thought that he was too delicate to survive the turmoils of the rock business. But Simon was immovable. He had glimpsed escape, escape from what his life had been up until now. There was no other choice.

3.

At first it was fun, to be away from home, to be free, to be a rock star. At first he enjoyed the crowds of barely teenage girls rushing toward the stage, even as he feared that they might tear him apart. At first he liked the traveling, despite the mind-numbing long-distance bus rides and the nail-biting plane rides. At first he relished experimenting with the drink and the drugs and the girls suddenly so readily available to him.

But then it began to go sour. The band members, exhausted with the road, nervous about their future, weary of spending so much time together, began to snipe at each other. They fought over the smallest things, the length of a solo or the placement of the stage lights. They railed at Phil about the deal his father had made for them. But most of all they took it out on Simon, pressing him to come up with another hit.

Simon tried. While the rest of the band were out getting high or getting laid, he would sit in some featureless motel room and write songs. In the end he wrote enough of them to fill out most of their first and only album. Like their first hits, a lot of them had girls' names in their titles: *Lucille Dreams* and *Come Back Sandy* and *Mirabella*. They were decent enough songs. But none of them was a *Miranda* or a *Melanie,* and none would be a hit record. The spark was gone, and he could not rekindle it.

He began to crack.

There were panic attacks. He would be sitting around, smoking grass, and suddenly the terror would seize him, the terror that his life had run completely out of control, and he would feel as if his brain were about to spiral out of his skull.

He stopped smoking grass. But now the terror knew where to find him: in lonely hotel rooms and on cross-country airplane rides, watching a movie or performing on stage, it would strike at him without warning.

He began to hate performing. He just could not stand it anymore, seeing all those faces out there, looking at him, listening to his songs, feeling his feelings.

He told the others that he wanted to quit. The band's manager sent him to a fashionable doctor, who prescribed tranquilizers. For a while they helped to numb his fear.

Then he began to see Elena.

It happened first of all in Cleveland. He was fumbling his way through *Oh Melanie* with fingers grown sluggish from the medication when he happened to glance up. He saw her sitting there in the front row of the audience. She was wearing her red cloak, the same one she had worn the day they met.

"Hey," he told Davie, between songs. "Look there. Elena."

"Elena?" Davie said, squinting to where Simon was pointing. "What would Elena be doing in Cleveland?"

Then Simon realized his mistake. The girl he was staring at looked nothing like Elena.

"Sorry," he said. "Forget it."

He told no one when it happened again in Detroit. Or again in Philadelphia and St. Louis. They would just dismiss it, he thought, as the fantasies of a lovesick kid. But he was over Elena, he had been for months.

Or perhaps they would think, as he himself had begun to suspect, that he was going over the edge.

When it happened again in Buffalo, it occurred to him that Elena might be dead, that this might be her ghost come to haunt him. After the show he drank half a bottle of scotch and called her home. He hung up when she answered.

He saw her again and again. Always it seemed to happen during one of those songs, *Oh Melanie* or *Dance Miranda*. It was as though the music were calling her to him. Not the real Elena, but the Elena of his dreams, the Elena he had created in those songs.

"A song is a spell, man," Davie had told him once, during a flirtation with the occult. "A heavy spell."

He began to wonder what kind of spell he had cast.

4.

In New Orleans she came to his hotel room.

It was two-thirty in the morning and he was sleeping restlessly. He woke up to see her standing beside the bed.

"Elena?" he said.

She let her cape fall back and she was naked underneath, the way he had always imagined her. He reached out to touch her and his hand went through her arm. He screamed. She vanished.

He lay in bed until dawn, his mind racing. Then he got up and got dressed and packed a bag. He took a cab to the bus station and he got on a bus. Eventually he arrived home.

The band's management pleaded with him to return. Then they tried threats. But he would not go back. He stayed in his parents' house, and he refused to see any visitors. He did not leave the house again for several months.

In the press release, the record company said that Simon was leaving the band because he was afraid of flying, which was true enough if only a small part of the truth.

The Avenging Angels found a new keyboard player and moved onwards towards an only briefly delayed oblivion.

5.

Under pressure from his parents, Simon began to see a psychiatrist, Dr. Neilson. He saw him three times a week for over a year.

Under Dr. Neilson's guidance Simon came to understand some of his key psychic conflicts. He recognized now how he both craved attention and abhorred it; how he was torn between expressing his deepest emotions and keeping them hidden from the world; and so on.

Simon's success as a rock musician, Dr. Neilson explained, had exacerbated these conflicts. It had disrupted his precarious psychic balance, leading first to his anxiety attacks and then to his visions of Elena's double.

"The classic *doppelganger,"* Dr. Neilson told him, "is a doubling of the self. Here we have the double of a young woman with whom you were once infatuated. But the meaning is the same. We can understand it only as a projection of the disowned self."

"Disowned?"

"To quiet the conflicts raging within you, you tried to give up whole parts of yourself: your creativity, your desire to be noticed, even your ability to feel. But they came back to haunt you all the same, in the guise of this young woman."

This part of Dr. Neilson's explanation never rang entirely true to Simon, but in time he learned to parrot it adequately. And in time, judging Simon to have achieved an adequate level of insight into himself, Dr. Neilson discontinued the therapy.

6.

Decades passed.

A great nostalgia swept the land. Some radio stations played nothing but the music of yesterday. Rock bands surviving from that era gained a new popularity playing revival shows. Other bands re-formed themselves in some combination approximating the original.

Dance Miranda featured on the soundtrack of a movie about the Sixties. Re-released as a single, it reached the top ten for the second time around.

Clearly there was money to be made in re-forming the Avenging Angels, more money than the first time around. Pressures were felt by the former band members. They were felt even by Simon Nagel, on his farm in eastern Ontario, Canada. He did his best to resist them.

7.

Following his recovery from his breakdown, Simon had gone to college. Afterward, he drifted back into music, writing and arranging advertising jingles in New York City. He was quick and he was clever and in time he built a solid reputation.

He met and married Gloria, a soap opera starlet from a small town in Ontario. On the birth of the first of their two children, they decided to leave the city. At first they thought of Connecticut, but they could find no property there that satisfied them. On a visit to Gloria's parents, they happened to pass a farm and it happened to be for sale.

The farm had a pasture and a pond and a Victorian farmhouse. It was a two hour drive from Toronto, where Simon could sell his skills to the local advertising industry, and it was close to Gloria's parents. But it was the woods that had compelled Simon to buy it: a thirty acre stand of hardwood trees, mostly maple, on the west side of the property.

The woods were a surviving fragment of the primal hardwood forest that had once stretched uninterrupted from Lake Huron to the west to Quebec's Gaspe region to the east. Most of the land had been cleared for crops, but these woods had been retained for firewood and maple syrup.

Simon became adept with a chainsaw, trimming off dead branches and cutting firewood, growing lean and well-muscled with the work. But mostly he just liked to walk in the woods. At times, they seemed endless. He could lose himself in them.

He was at peace for some years. But as the children reached school age, Gloria grew restless. She thought again of work and career. She found an agent in Toronto and began to work again, in commercials and local TV productions, sometimes staying over in the city for several nights.

Gloria pressed him to move back to the city: if not New York or Los Angeles, then at least Toronto. He refused. They fought over this and other things, and then they did not fight at all. Gloria took the children and moved out.

While his relationship was unraveling, Simon came to realize that the woods were dying. Bark peeled away through insect infestation and failed to regrow itself, as though the trees were no longer capable of fighting back. Trees began to turn yellow, then brown, in the middle of summer. In windstorms, dead branches would cascade down by the dozen. Sometimes whole trees snapped in half like toothpicks to reveal rotted interiors.

The trees, he soon discovered, were dying everywhere. The authorities blamed it on hard winters, dry springs, insects, acid rain. There were many explanations. But the trees were dying. And within him, too, something was dying, even as something else flickered into life.

8.

When John Tomalski called to ask if he could visit him, Simon agreed, even though he knew what John would ask of him, even though he remained determined to refuse it. He told himself it would be good to see his old friend again.

John had put on weight. His stomach spilled over the belt of his baggy Italian pants. Under the suntan, his face looked puffy.

"This is a nice place you got here," John told him, as they strolled by the pond. "A great place."

John could not see that the trees were dying.

They exchanged life stories. John lived in L.A. now, and was into his third marriage. After the break-up of the Angels he had played for a few years in one band or another, chasing the hit that never came. Finally he had given up and moved into producing. He had been very successful at it; his walls were lined with the gold records of his artists. But he yearned, even after all these years, for something more.

"Those were great times, weren't they?" he asked. "You remember that time in Philadelphia, when we threw the TV set out the window of that crummy motel, and then we called room service for another, and we kept on doing that. . . . "

"No," Simon said.

"You don't remember that?"

"They weren't great times. I hated it. The traveling, the crowds, the fighting. In the end, I hated it."

"Oh yeah," John said. "You had this thing about flying."

"It wasn't just the flying. It was everything."

"Well," John said. "We were only kids. I mean, if it had happened when we were older, we would have handled it a hell of a lot better. But you know, despite all the bullshit, we were great. We were a great little band."

"We were awful. Gil would get so drunk he could barely stand up on stage, and Davie was tripping half the time."

"But the records were great," John said, almost pleading. "The *songs* were great."

"Yes," Simon said. "You sang them well, John. You really did."

It was true. Although a singer of limited range, John had had an ethereal—even, as the pop magazines inevitably put it, angelic—quality to his voice.

They reached the edge of the woods. John came to a halt. He turned back to Simon.

"So what do you think?"

"About what?"

"About re-forming the Angels. There's a guy putting together a revival package, and he's been bugging me for months about bringing back the Angels. He's talking big dollars."

"You need the money, John?"

"I always need money. But it isn't just for the money. . . . It's something I'd really like to do. I never liked how it ended, the way everything just fell apart. I'd like for it to have ended on a high. And now we can do that, we can do it right."

"What do the others think?"

"Phil and Gil are raring to go. Davie isn't so keen. He's into levitation these days, running a TM center."

"He thinks he can levitate?"

"Oh, absolutely. You know Davie. But I think he'd do it if you did it."

"I don't know," Simon said. "I mean, do we really want to do this? Turn ourselves into a living jukebox, cranking out *Miranda* and *Melanie,* over and over again? Because that's all people will want to hear . . . "

"Is that so terrible? I mean, why wouldn't they want to hear them? They want to be seventeen, eighteen again. They're homesick, homesick in time. They want to go back to before life got so complicated, to when they still had the feeling they could do anything, be anything. And we'll be helping them. We'll be helping them cheat time."

"Personally, I hated being seventeen."

"Well sure, I had some rough times myself. But that's not what people remember. They just remember the good times. And Christ, you must have liked *something.* What about Elena? You remember, Gil's hippy dippy girlfriend that you had a thing for."

"Sure I remember her."

"Well, you liked Elena, didn't you?"

"Sure," Simon said. "Sure I liked Elena."

"Funny thing," John said. "My mom ran into Elena last year. At Saks. She has a couple of kids now. She was married to a lawyer, but it didn't last. Now she's a real estate agent, quite successful."

"That's nice," Simon said.

"So anyway, what do you think?"

Simon looked past John to the dying woods. He shrugged.

"Sure," he said. "Why not?"

9.

And so they met again, after so many years.

Gil Daniels was a traveling representative in computer supplies. He was on his second marriage. He had met his wife through AA, and he was still on the wagon. There were still flickers of the old Gil, but mostly he seemed beaten, subdued. It was as though a part of the man had been cut away, although Simon had to admit that he preferred him this way.

Phil Stein was some kind of therapist, and he talked a lot about psychic energy and being in the now. The rest of the time he talked about his investments.

Davie Stanton was on another planet most of the time. But he always had been.

When they began to rehearse, Phil and Gil were very rusty. But in time they worked up to something approximating a rhythm section.

Davie, on the other hand, was a pleasant surprise. He had not touched a guitar in ten years, but he still had all the riffs.

John's voice had roughened over the years, grown thicker and coarser. But somehow Simon liked this new voice better, it added an interesting dissonance to the proceedings.

10.

"What happened to you, Simon?" Phil asked, one day when they were sitting drinking coffee during a break in rehearsals.

"The same thing that happened to everyone else, I guess. I grew up."

"But you were so talented. Those songs, they were just amazing. I always thought you would go all the way. I thought you would be right up there with Lennon and McCartney, Brian Wilson, all those guys. And you end up writing jingles for candy commercials."

"I like writing jingles," Simon said. "Anyway, there were no more where those songs came from. It just stopped."

"*You* stopped. You stopped yourself. There was real feeling in those songs. But you cut yourself off from it."

"No," Simon said. "Really. Those two songs were all I had. But that's all right, you know. I had my moment in the sun."

"And you couldn't wait to get back into the shade."

Simon shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Maybe that's true. But the shade is all right, too. It's kind of comfortable there."

"So why poke your head out now? Why do the tour?"

"I'm doing it for the same reason as you. For the money. And for John, because he wanted this so badly."

"Bullshit. You're doing it for yourself."

"Look, Phil . . . "

"You think you've got it all under control. You think you're just going to sleepwalk through this tour, and none of it is going to make any difference to you. But you're wrong, Simon. You're going to have to deal with it. And I think you *want* to deal with it."

"Deal with what?"

"With the past," Phil said. "What else? That's what it always comes down to. Because the past is alive, Simon, don't kid yourself about that. It's always there, buried in what we are. You open that door even a crack and it's all going to come rushing back."

Simon shrugged. "I'll take my chances," he said.

11.

They rehearsed until there was nothing more to be gained from rehearsing. And then they criss-crossed the country as part of a revival package with three other bands from the Sixties. They were nervous before the first show. John was popping Valium and Phil was throwing up in the washroom and Simon's hands were shaking. But as soon as they stepped on stage and the applause washed around them, Simon knew that it would be fine.

"What goes around comes around," John said, and they launched into *Oh Melanie*. And the crowd were on their feet cheering the first note. Simon knew that the audience were not applauding the band. They were applauding themselves. But that was fine, too.

Soon, it became routine. They would come on, second from the bottom of the bill, and crank out their set: twenty-five minutes, eight songs including the obligatory encore, some patter in between from John, everything timed to the last second. And then they would go back to their hotel rooms and watch TV and call their various wives and kids. No fights, no groupies, no drunken sprees. It was all very different now.

Simon never watched TV. Sometimes he would speak to his kids. Mostly he would read.

He was reading a lot about the environment now, not just the trees, but the lakes and the oceans, the whales and the polar bears. Reading these books it seemed to him that it was not just the trees that were dying. The whole planet was dying. But even if that were true, this was perhaps as good a way as any to spend his time, reminding people of a time when they were more truly alive.

And so they coasted along, from one town to the next, and the audiences were happy, and the band was happy, and the dollars rolled in.

In Toronto, his children came backstage and looked at him with a new wonder in their eyes. Gloria, who came with them, was polite but distant. She had filed for divorce, was getting lots of work in commercials, was living with a stockbroker.

In Miami Beach, his parents came to see him; in Philadelphia, his sister and her husband and their kids.

And in Chicago he saw Elena.

12.

He had not thought about Elena in years. The past was lost to him, he had closed himself to it. But now he was living in the past, living in it every day.

They were playing *Oh Melanie* when he glanced up and saw her sitting in the front row of the audience. A young woman, perhaps nineteen or twenty, with long dark hair, wearing a red cloak. A woman who looked exactly like Elena, the way she had looked when she was nineteen and he was seventeen.

At first he thought nothing of it. "Say," he told Gil, between songs. "That woman looks just like Elena."

"Elena?" Gil said. "I'm not sure that . . . "

And then Simon saw that the woman he had been staring at looked nothing like Elena.

It's happening, he thought. It's happening all over again.

He felt both a chill of fear and a strange surge of hope.

13.

He saw her in city after city: Elena, the Elena he had once known, frozen in time.

In Dallas, as he had somehow expected, she came to him in the night. He woke to find her standing by his bed, the way she had done so many years before. He began to reach his hand out to touch her, but then caught himself.

She leaned over the bed and put her hand on his face, and he felt a momentary resistance, a brief sensation of warmth, before her hand passed through him.

This time she did not vanish, but stood there shimmering faintly.

He got out of bed and pulled on his dressing gown.

"Elena?" he said. "What's happening, Elena? Why is this happening?"

She stood there smiling at him, but she did not speak.

He thought about calling someone. John. Phil. Dr. Neilson, if he was still alive. But he did not.

Instead he spent the night talking to her, and then singing to her, crooning those old songs to her over and over again. And it seemed to him that she was becoming more real, more *there,* all the time.

Somewhere in the night he dozed off, with the phantom Elena lying beside him on the bed, and in the morning she was gone.

He understood, of course, that he was going mad.

14.

In Houston, when she came to him again, she was real for him, she was completely real. And he no longer questioned what was happening to him. And for hours they made love.

And after that, more cities. More nights with Elena. He woke each morning hoping and fearing that she would still be there beside him. But she never was.

15.

They came to New York City to play the two-night stand that would wind up the tour.

It was the first night, and they were sitting around the dressing room waiting their turn to play.

Simon was reading an article in *Harrowsmith,* Phil and Gil were talking about the stock market, Davie was meditating. And then John came in and said, "Hey, guys, look who's here."

Simon glanced up from his magazine and experienced a moment of double-vision. She was Elena and she was not, this smartly dressed woman with the short dark hair and the diamond earrings, the purple silk blouse and the linen suit. She was the real Elena, no doubt, but she was not the one who came to him in the night, not the one that he had called into being.

Elena was cool to Gil, still angry from some long-remembered slight. But she was friendly to the rest of them, and particularly warm to Simon.

"It's good to see you again," she said, taking his hand and holding it for a long moment.

"You, too," he said.

"It was never the same without you, Elena," John said. "You were the secret of our success."

"You did pretty well for a while," she said.

"We were running on empty. Without you around, Simon just had no inspiration . . . "

Simon felt himself blushing.

"Yeah, well," he said, to cover his embarrassment. "You can't be a horny seventeen year old forever."

"That's right," chimed in Gil. "You can be a horny forty year old instead." He leaned over and put his arm around Elena's shoulder. Delicately, as though picking up a piece of garbage, she removed it.

It was time for them to go on stage. She gave Simon her card.

"Call me," she said.

16.

"Who was that woman?" John asked Simon, when they met over breakfast the next day in the hotel's coffee shop.

"What woman?"

"The one I saw leaving your room this morning. I woke up real early, before dawn, and I couldn't get back to sleep. So I thought I would go out jogging. I got dressed and I opened my door and I saw her heading down the corridor. By the time I got to the elevators she was gone."

Simon jerked his head back in shock.

"You saw someone coming out of my room? But there was nobody with me."

"Okay, okay," John said. "If you say so."

"Must have been someone else's room."

"Sure," John said. "If that's how you want it. But it's funny, she kind of reminded me of someone."

What did it mean, Simon wondered, that John could see her? That she was becoming more real, somehow? That soon everyone would see her?

John stabbed at his egg. "In the old days," he said, "*I* used to get all the best groupies. Not that I'm interested now, you understand."

"Actually, Davie did," Simon said. "And like I told you, it wasn't my room."

"Whatever," John said. "Are you going to call her?"

"Call who?"

"Elena."

"Elena?"

"Come on. I saw her slip you her phone number yesterday."

"Oh yeah. Elena."

"I think you should call her, man. I mean, a guy your age, you shouldn't be running around with these younger chicks. I can tell you from experience, it's nothing but trouble. But Elena, she's a great lady. If I wasn't happily married myself . . . "

"Elena's an old friend, that's all."

"She was interested, I could see. Actually, I think she was always interested."

John leaned back in his chair and stretched out his arms. "Didn't I tell you this would be a gas? Getting up there, playing the old songs, meeting up with old friends."

"Sure," Simon said. "It's been a lot of fun."

17.

That night she spoke to him.

"Elena?" he asked, as she came into the room.

"Melanie," she said. "Or Miranda. It doesn't matter. Maybe I like Melanie better."

"Melanie," he said. "I'm not sure this is such a good idea."

"It's your idea," she said. "No one else's."

"Who are you?"

"Miranda," she said. "Melanie."

"What are you?"

"The one you want." She moved towards him.

"Why are you here?"

"Because you called me."

"No," he said. "This is crazy. This can't go on."

"Yes, it can. On and on. Always and forever. Just the way you wanted it to be."

She put her arms around him, and he did not resist.

18.

"It's true, isn't it?" Elena asked him. "You did write those songs about me?"

"Yes," he said. "Of course it's true."

They were walking in Central Park. It was fall. Leaves crunched beneath their feet.

"You don't know how long I've waited to ask you that."

"I would have told you at the time, if you had asked me."

"No, you wouldn't. You would just have gotten embarrassed, and denied it."

"Maybe I would have. But you knew, anyway."

"I guess I did. But later, you know . . . you wonder if it really happened that way. I would tell my friends about it, because everyone knew those songs, and it was one of the most interesting things that ever happened to me. And they would say, but the girl in the song is called Miranda, or Melanie, or whatever."

"I'll give you an affidavit," he said.

"How come you never told me?" she asked.

"About the songs?"

"About how you felt."

"I did. In the songs."

"But you never called me."

"You were Gil's girlfriend. And I didn't think you could possibly like me."

"Of course I liked you."

"Not the way I wanted you to."

"I thought you were very sweet. Cute, you know. But a little young. It was flattering, but it was also a bit embarrassing, the way you seemed to worship me, put me on a pedestal. I didn't deserve that at all. I was a pretty ordinary person, really."

"You were beautiful."

"I was attractive, sure. I knew how to put myself together. But I wasn't the way you saw me. I mean, for a while I thought it would be kind of glamorous to be a dancer. But I was never that good at it, I just liked the idea of it. And underneath it all, I guess all along I wanted to get married, raise kids, the usual stuff."

"All right," Simon said. "You were ordinary. We were both ordinary."

"Not you, Simon. You were always something special."

"What was so special about me? I'm just a guy who wrote a hit song once. One and a half hit songs."

"Don't shrug it off," she said. "You wrote some songs that people loved. Even if you did nothing else, there are still the songs."

"Silly songs, really."

"No, Simon. They were true. At the time, and always."

They walked on, talking about their children, their marriages, their work.

Simon enjoyed being with her. She was warm, she was clever, she was funny. But at the same time he wanted nothing more than to be back in his room with the other Elena, who now called herself Melanie, singing to her, making love to her.

"So it's your last show tonight," she said.

"The last one this year, anyhow. Maybe the last one ever. Although I said that twenty years ago."

"Are you sorry?"

"No, I couldn't say that. I mean, it's been fun in a way. And it's been great seeing you again. But somehow it's enough. It's time to let the Avenging Angels rest."

"I suppose you'll be glad to get back to your farm. John told me it's wonderful."

"I don't know where I'll go, actually. Maybe I'll stick around New York for a while."

"Maybe you'll find it more stimulating, living here. Start writing songs again."

"Maybe," he said.

She looked at her watch. "I really should be going," she said. "I have a showing at three."

"Have dinner with me tonight?" he asked, surprising himself.

"I'd love to," she said.

19.

The audience was more than usually fervent that last night, hyped up by the MC.

"The last performance by the fabulous Avenging Angels," he told them. "Your very last chance to dance."

After the usual encore, *Dance Miranda,* the crowd kept whistling and shouting for more.

"Do it," the promoter told them, as they stood around in the wings.

"The Bluebells are on next," John said.

"They don't want the Bluebells. They want you."

And so they trooped back on stage and the crowd roared in approval.

Simon hit the opening chords of *Oh Melanie*. They had already played it once that night, but the crowd was delighted to hear it again. They were rapturing out, reveling in recaptured time.

"Oh Melanie, I want you to be, beside me girl, for eternity . . ."

It was, he thought, and not for the first time, a quite absurd song, a song only a naive seventeen year old or the most cynical hack could write. It expressed and demanded an impossible devotion. The song was a lie. And yet, as Elena had said, there was also a sense in which it was true.

"Oh Melanie, now that you're mine, I want to stop time . . ."

He didn't think about Elena, waiting for him backstage. He didn't look at the girl in the long red cape sitting, as always, in the front row. He lost himself in the song.

" . . . until eternity, oh baby, eternity . . ."

When they hit the second chorus, everything froze. He could not turn his head, or push a key on the piano. And around him the other members of the band were frozen, also, like so many statues. Or flies, he thought. Flies in amber.

He could not feel his heart beating.

The noise in the auditorium damped down into a dull roar. The light in the room changed colors, seemed to bend weirdly.

And then he saw her coming towards him across the stage. She was moving freely, her cloak flapping behind her.

She reached out her hand to touch him, and he was free, too.

"Let's go," she said.

"Go where?"

"Eternity," she said. She reached out to take his hand.

He pulled away from her.

"Death?" he said. "Is that what you mean?"

"Eternity," she said, again.

"No," he said.

"No?"

"Go away. Go back to wherever you came from."

"I came from you, Simon. I want only what you want."

"No."

She stood there staring at him for a moment. And then her hand disappeared into the folds of her cloak. When she pulled it out again, she was holding a knife. It glinted purple in the strange light.

"This is crazy," Simon said, taking a step backwards. "You can't hurt me."

"Eternity, baby," she said. She plunged the knife towards his chest. He held his hand out to ward it off. It brushed against his knuckles. He felt a sharp pain. He watched, fascinated, as specks of blood, greenish in color, flew off.

"Stop it," he said.

She slashed at him again.

Enraged now, he caught hold of her wrist. They struggled across the stage, before the frozen crowd. He wrenched the knife away from her, forced her to her knees. He held the knife at her throat.

She stopped struggling. It was as if she were waiting for him to kill her. And for a moment he wanted to, wanted desperately to end this.

But then it came to him what he would be killing. And his rage ebbed away, to be replaced by an overpowering sense of tenderness. Because, after all, he was her and she was him.

He relaxed his grip on the knife, let it slip to the floor.

"Come back," he said.

He felt her rushing into him.

And then he was back at the piano and John was singing the last verse of *Oh Melanie,* and the crowd were on their feet yelling, and blood was dripping red from his hand onto the ivory of the keys.

20.

"That was really something," John said, as he worked the cork out of the champagne bottle. "It was like they never wanted it to end."

"Memories," Phil said. "The ultimate commodity. Wish I could buy an option on memories."

They were sitting around the dressing room, John, Phil, Gil, and Simon. Davie was already on his way to the airport.

With them were John's wife Beth, and Gil's wife Margaret, and Phil's girlfriend Louise, who had come for this final show. And Elena.

John popped the cork and poured the drinks.

"We need a toast," he said.

"I got one," Gil said, raising his Coke can. "Same time next year."

"Depends on how the market is doing," Phil said, and they laughed, but they were looking at Simon. He was sitting quietly next to Elena, staring thoughtfully at his bandaged fingers.

"No," he said. "I don't think so. I'm glad we did it, but it's finished. I'm finished with it, anyway. You guys want to go on with it, I'll come watch. But no more for me."

"But they're your songs, Simon," John said. "People still want to hear your songs."

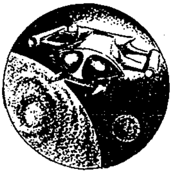
"They're not my songs anymore," he said. "They're everyone's. And I don't know, maybe it's time to write some new ones."

"You ever need a producer . . . "

"I know who to call."

"Okay, then," John said, raising his glass. "To the Angels. To the late great Avenging Angels."

They drank. ●

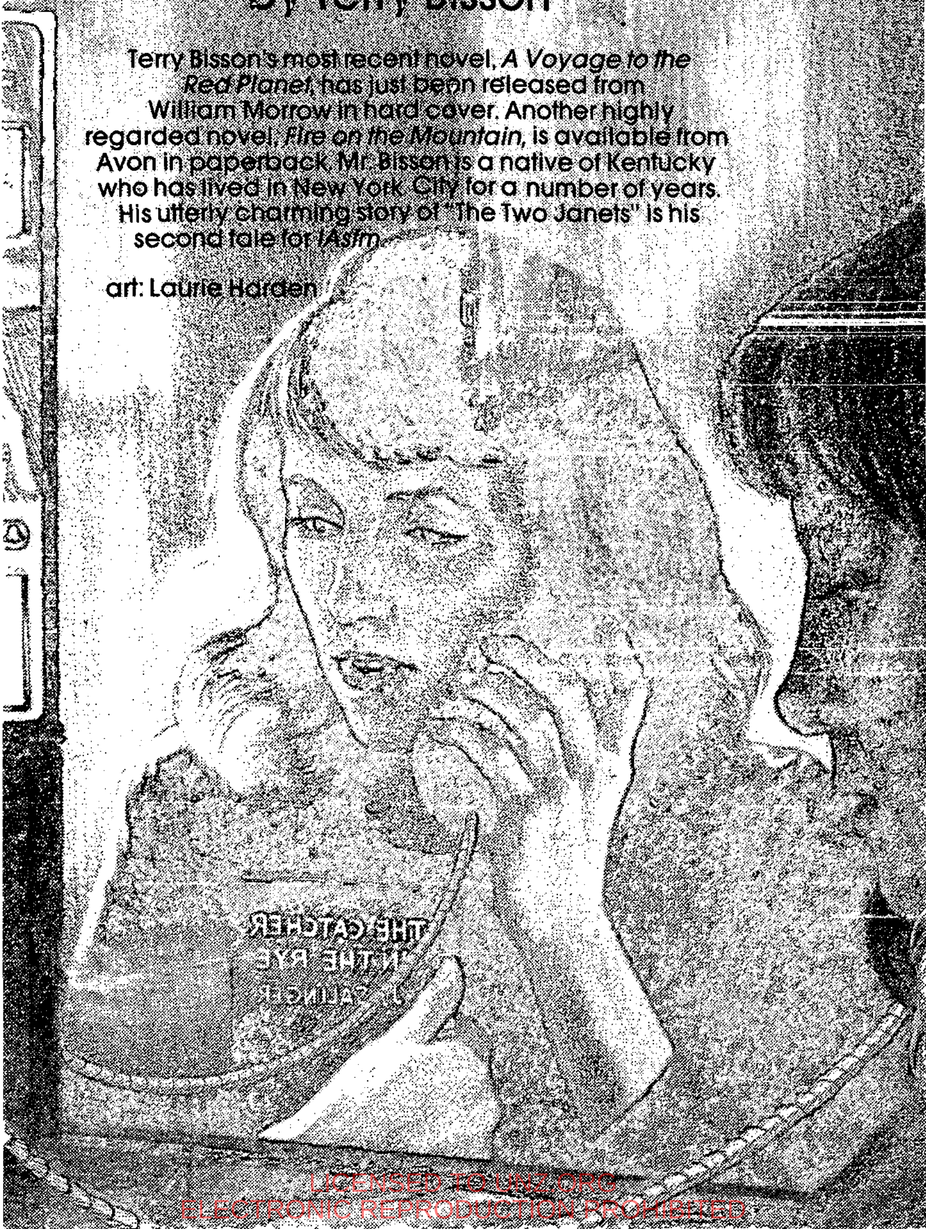


THE TWO JANETS

by Terry Bisson

Terry Bisson's most recent novel, *A Voyage to the Red Planet*, has just been released from William Morrow in hard cover. Another highly regarded novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, is available from Avon in paperback. Mr. Bisson is a native of Kentucky who has lived in New York City for a number of years. His utterly charming story of "The Two Janets" is his second tale for *IAsfm*.

art: Laurie Harden



I'm not one of those people who thinks you have to read a book to get something out of it. You can learn a lot about a book by picking it up, turning it over, rubbing the cover, riffling the pages open and shut. Especially if it's been read enough times before, it'll speak to you.

This is why I like to hang around used book stores on my lunch hour. I was at the outdoor bookstall on the west side of Union Square, the one that opens out of huge crates, when my mother called. It is tempting here to claim to remember that I was looking at an old paperback of, say, *Rabbit Run,* but actually it was Henry Gregor Felsen's *Hot Rod,* the cover telling the whole story through the hairdos.

The pay phone on the corner nearest 16th Street was ringing and wouldn't stop. Finally, I picked it up and said, "Hello? Mother?"

"Janet? Is that you?" My mother had this uncanny, really, ability to call on pay phones and get me. She does it about once a month.

Well, of course it was me: otherwise would I have answered, "Mother"? "Did you have trouble finding me?" I asked.

"If you only knew. I called three phones, and the last two you wouldn't believe." It doesn't always work.

"So how's everything?" I asked. It came out "ever-thang." My accent, which I have managed to moderate, always reemerges when I talk with anybody from home.

"Fine." She told me about Alan, my ex-fiancé, and Janet, my best friend. They used to call us "The Two Janets." Mother keeps up with my old high school friends, most of whom are of course still in Owensboro. Then she said: "Guess what. John Updike just moved to Owensboro."

"John Updike?"

"The writer. *Rabbit Run?* It was about a week ago. He bought a house out on Maple Drive, across from the hospital there."

"This was in the paper?"

"No, of course not. I'm sure he wants his privacy. I heard it from Elizabeth Dorsey, your old music teacher. Her oldest daughter, Mary Beth, is married to Sweeney Kost Junior who sells real estate with that new group out on Leitchfield Road. She called to tell me because she thought you might be interested."

It is well known that I have an interest in literature. I came to New York to get a job in publishing. My roommate already has one at S&S (Simon and Schuster) and I called her before I went back to work. She doesn't go to lunch until two. She hadn't heard anything about John Updike moving to Owensboro, but she checked *PW (Publishers Weekly)* and found an item saying that John Updike had sold his house in Massachusetts and moved to a small midwestern city.

That bothered me. Owensboro sits right across the river from Indiana, but it's still the South, not the Midwest. The northernmost statue to

Confederate heroes sits on the courthouse lawn. I'm not touchy about that stuff but some people are. Then I thought that if you just looked at a map, as they might have done fact-checking at the *PW* office, or as Updike himself might have done, looking for a new place to live, you might think Owensboro was in the Midwest since it's much closer to St. Louis than to Atlanta. Then I thought, maybe Updike was just saying "Midwest" to throw people off. Maybe he was, like Salinger, trying to get away from the world. Then I thought, maybe he didn't move to Owensboro at all, and the whole thing was just a mistake, a coincidence, a wild flight of fancy. The more I thought about this theory, the better I liked it. "Small city in the Midwest" could mean Iowa City, where a well-known Writer's Workshop is held; or any one of a hundred college towns like Crawfordsville, Indiana (Wabash); Gambier, Ohio (Kenyon); or Yellow Springs, Ohio (Antioch). Or even Indianapolis or Cincinnati. To a New Yorker, and all writers, even when they live in Massachusetts, are New Yorkers (in a way), Indianapolis and Cincinnati are small cities. Or if you wanted to get really close to home there is Evansville, Indiana, at 130,500 definitely a "small city" (Owensboro at 52,000 is only barely a city) and one that might even attract a writer like John Updike.

With all this, I was eleven minutes late getting back to work. But what are they going to do, fire a temp?

That was on Thursday, May 18. I had the usual weekend, and on Monday night, right after the rates changed, Alan, my ex-fiancé, made his weekly call. "Found a job yet?" he asked (knowing he would have heard from my mother if I had). Then he added, "Did you hear Saul Bellow moved to Owensboro?"

"You mean John Updike," I said.

"No, that was last week. Saul Bellow moved here just yesterday." Alan runs two of his father's four liquor stores. He and I still share an interest in books and literature.

"How could that be?" I said. I would have thought he was making it up but Alan, to his credit (I guess), never makes things up.

I thought about calling Janet but I am always calling her, so the next morning I called Mother from work. I was temping for an insurance adjuster with a WATS line. "Mother, did Saul Bellow move to Owensboro?" I asked, getting right to the point.

"Well, yes, dear, he did. He's living out in those apartments on Scherm Road. The ones where Wallace Carter Cox and Loreena Dyson lived right after he got his divorce."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, you didn't seem very excited when John Updike moved here, dear, so I thought you didn't much care. You have made a new life for yourself in New York, after all."

I let that go. "It sure is mighty nice of you to keep up with where everybody lives," I joked.

"When a famous person moves to a town like this," she said, "everybody notices."

I wondered about that. I didn't think people in Owensboro, outside of Alan, even knew who Saul Bellow was. I'll bet not twenty people there have read his books. I have only read one, the most recent one. The other Janet reads only nonfiction.

The next week Philip Roth moved to Owensboro. I found out from Janet, who called me, a new thing for her since it's usually me who puts out the effort, not to mention the money, to stay in touch.

"Guess who we saw in the mall today," she said. "Philip Roth."

"Are you sure? How did you know?" I asked. I couldn't imagine her recognizing Philip Roth.

"Your mother pointed him out. She recognized his face from a story in *People* magazine. I'm not sure he would be considered handsome if he wasn't a famous writer."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Was he just visiting or has he moved to Owensboro too? And what mall are you talking about?"

"What mall!" Janet said. "There's only one, out Livermore Road. It's so far out of town that hardly anybody goes there. I couldn't believe it when we saw Philip Roth out there."

"What were you doing out at the mall with my mother?' I asked. "Is she bothering you again?"

"She gets a little lonesome. I go by and see her, and maybe we go shopping or something. Is that a crime?"

"Of course not," I said. I'm glad my mother has friends. I just wish they weren't my best friends, with the same name as me.

Mother called me at work the next day. I have asked her not to do this when I am temping, but sometimes she can't make the payphone thing work. Most companies don't like for temps to get calls, even from family. E.L. Doctorow had moved to Owensboro and was staying in Dr. Crippens' house on Wildwood Drive, only two blocks away.

"He has a little beard," Mother said, "He has a little dog and walks it regularly every day. He's renting the house while Dr. Crippen and his wife are in Michigan."

"So he hasn't exactly *moved* to Owensboro," I said, somehow relieved.

"Well, he's out here every morning," she said, "walking his dog. Call it whatever you want to."

I know the house very well. The Crippens are not ostentatiously tacky the way some (indeed, most) doctors are. It was the Crippens who had encouraged me to go ahead and move to New York if that was what I wanted, when everybody else in my class was getting married. It's not an older home, of the kind I prefer, but if you had to live in a suburban-style house, theirs would do.

All day I imagined E.L. Doctorow watering the plants and looking through Dr. and Dr. (they are both doctors) Crippens' books. They have the most books of anybody in Owensboro. The next day at lunch I went to Barnes & Noble and looked through Doctorow's novels in paperback. All together they made a neat little stack the size of a shoebox.

I decided I was glad he had moved to Owensboro.

It's hard to make friends in New York. I wondered what it was like in Owensboro for famous writers. Did they ever meet? Did they know one another? Did they pay visits, talk shop, drink together? I asked Alan when he called Monday night (right after the rates changed) but he seemed embarrassed by the question.

"Apparently, they have all moved here independently," he said. "They're never seen together. I wouldn't want to speculate."

When William Styron moved to Owensboro the last day in May, I wasn't so surprised. At least he was from the South, although two more different regions than the lower Ohio Valley and the Tidewater of Virginia could hardly be imagined. May and even June are nice in Owensboro, but July and August were coming, and when I thought of Styron blinking in the fierce muggy heat, he seemed even more out of place than the urban Jewish writers like Roth, Doctorow, and Bellow. And Updike, a New Englander! I felt sorry for them all. But that was silly. Every place now has air conditioning.

When I called Janet, she reminded me that Mother's birthday was coming up. I knew I was expected to fly home. Janet told me all about how she and Alan were planning to take her out to dinner. This was to make me feel guilty. I wasn't planning to fall for it like I did last year, at the last minute.

It is very hard to make friends in New York. My roommate and her ex-roomate had shares in a house in the Hamptons (well, almost the Hamptons) and I had been invited out for the weekend. "You can't go home for your mother's birthday every year," I told myself.

Mother called me a few days later—a payphone again, this one near a deli on 39th Street where she had gotten me once before—to announce that J.D. Salinger had moved to Owensboro.

"Wait a minute," I said. This was getting out of hand. "How come no women writers ever move to Owensboro. What about Ann Tyler? Or Alice Walker? Or Bobbie Ann Mason, who is actually from Mayfield (not that far away)? How come they're all men, and all these old guys?"

"I suppose you expect me to ask them that!" Mother said. "I only found out the author of *Catcher in the Rye* moved here because Mr. Roth told Reverend Curtis."

"Mr. Roth?" So now it was "Mr." Roth.

"Philip Roth, *Goodbye Columbus?* He's renting Reverend Curtis's son Wallace's house out on Livermore Road, and you know how Reverend Curtis won't take checks, and they saw this strange-looking man at the cash machine, and Mr. Roth whispers, 'That's J.D. Salinger. *Catcher in the Rye?'* Alan said he looked like some hillbilly in town from Ohio County."

"How did Alan get into this?"

"He was standing in line behind them at the cash machine," Mother said. "He just happened to overhear."

On Monday night, Alan told me Philip Roth had seemed as surprised as the rest of them to see J.D. Salinger in Owensboro.

"Maybe they had all moved to Owensboro trying to get away from him," I said, trying to be funny.

"I doubt that," Alan said. "Anyway, it's hardly the kind of question you can ask."

Mother should marry Alan, not me. She and him think exactly alike.

As Mother's birthday approached, I tried to concentrate on my upcoming weekend in the Hamptons. I knew what I had to guard against was the last-minute temptation to fly home.

When I called Janet later in the week from a lawyer's office—they never watch their phone bills—she said, "Do you know the movie *Bright Lights, Big City?"*

"Michael J. Fox has moved to Owensboro," I said, astonished in spite of myself.

"Not him, the other one, the author. I forget his name."

"McInerney," I said. "Jay McInerney. Are you sure?" I didn't want to say it because it sounded so snobbish, but Jay McInerney didn't exactly seem Owensboro caliber.

"Of course I'm sure. He looks just like Michael J. Fox. I saw him walking down at that little park by the river. You know, the one where Norman Mailer hangs out."

"Norman Mailer. I didn't even know he lived in Owensboro," I said.

"Why not?" Janet said. "A lot of famous writers make Owensboro their home."

Make Owensboro Their Home. That was the first time I'd heard it said like that. It seemed to make it official.

Janet's call made me think, and for the first time since I broke up with him, I called Alan. At least he knew who Jay McInerney was, although he had never read the book. "The other Janet said she saw McInerney and Mailer down there at the park," I said. "Doesn't that mean the famous writers are starting to meet one another and hang out together?"

"You always want to jump to conclusions," Alan said. "They might have been in the same park at totally different times of the day. Even when they do meet, they don't talk. The other day at K-Mart, Joe Billy Survant saw E.L. Doctorow and John Irving both in Housewares, and they sort of nodded, but that was all."

John Irving? But I let it go. "Housewares," I said instead. "Sounds like folks are really settling in."

"We're taking your mother to dinner at the Executive Inn for her fifty-first birthday Friday night," Alan said.

"I've been invited for a weekend in the Hamptons," I said. "Well, almost the Hamptons."

"Oh, I understand," he said. Alan likes to imagine he understands me. "But if you change you mind I'll pick you up at the airport in Evansville."

Evansville, Indiana, is thirty miles from Owensboro. It used to seem like a big city to me, but after eighteen months in New York, it seemed pathetic and insignificant: all trees from the air, and hardly any traffic. The one-story terminal looks like a shopping center bank branch. You climb down out of the plane on a ladder.

There was Alan in his sensible-with-a-flair Olds Cutlass Supreme. I felt the usual mixture of warmth and dismay on seeing him. I guess you might call it warm dismay.

"Who's that?" I asked, gesturing toward a bearlike figure at the US Air ticket counter.

Alan whispered. "That's Thomas M. Disch. Science fiction. But quality stuff."

"Science fiction?" But the name was familiar, at least sort of. Although Disch isn't exactly famous, he seemed more the Owensboro type than McInerney. "He's moving to Owensboro, too?

"How should I know? He may have just been here in Evansville for the speedboat races. Anyway, he's leaving. Let's talk about you."

We drove back home on the Kentucky side of the river, through Henderson.

That whole weekend in Owensboro, I only saw three famous writers, not counting Disch, who is not really famous and who was in Evansville, not Owensboro, anyway. Tom Pynchon was at the take-out counter at the Moonlight, buying barbecued mutton. He bought three liters of Diet Coke, so it looked like he might be having a party, but on the way home from the Executive Inn we drove past his house on Littlewood Drive and it was dark.

For dinner, we had steak and salad. Mother was a hoot. Alan insisted on paying, as usual. We were home by ten, and by ten-thirty Mother was asleep in front of the TV. I got two cans of Falls City out of the refrigerator and sneaked her Buick out of the garage. I picked up the other Janet, just like in the old days, by scratching on her screen. "The Two Janets," she whispered conspiratorially. She said the cops were rough on DWI (Driving While under the Influence) these days, but I wasn't worried. This was still the South; we were still girls. We cruised down Griffith, out Frederica, down Fourth, down by the river. There was hardly any traffic.

"Has Alan asked you to marry him again?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"Well, if he does, I think you should."

"You mean you wish I would."

The streets were still and dark and empty.

"Sure isn't New York," I sighed.

"Well, nobody can say you haven't given it a shot," the other Janet said.

At midnight we went to the all night Convenience Mart at 18th and Triplett for two more cans of beer. John Updike was looking through the magazines (even though the little sign says not to). At 12:12 A.M. Joyce Carol Oates came in for a pack of cigarettes, and surprising us both, they left together. ●

UNDER THE ICE LIES MONTPELIER

Under the ice lies Montpelier,
and above it
an outpost, small pitiful.
No barrier to the Eskimos
whose new Empire is defined
by the edge of ice.
Once a week blimps float up
the Connecticut Valley
to supply the Montpelier outpost
on the ice frontier.
Wolves pace blimp shadows
and walk the boundaries of
their resurrected kingdom.

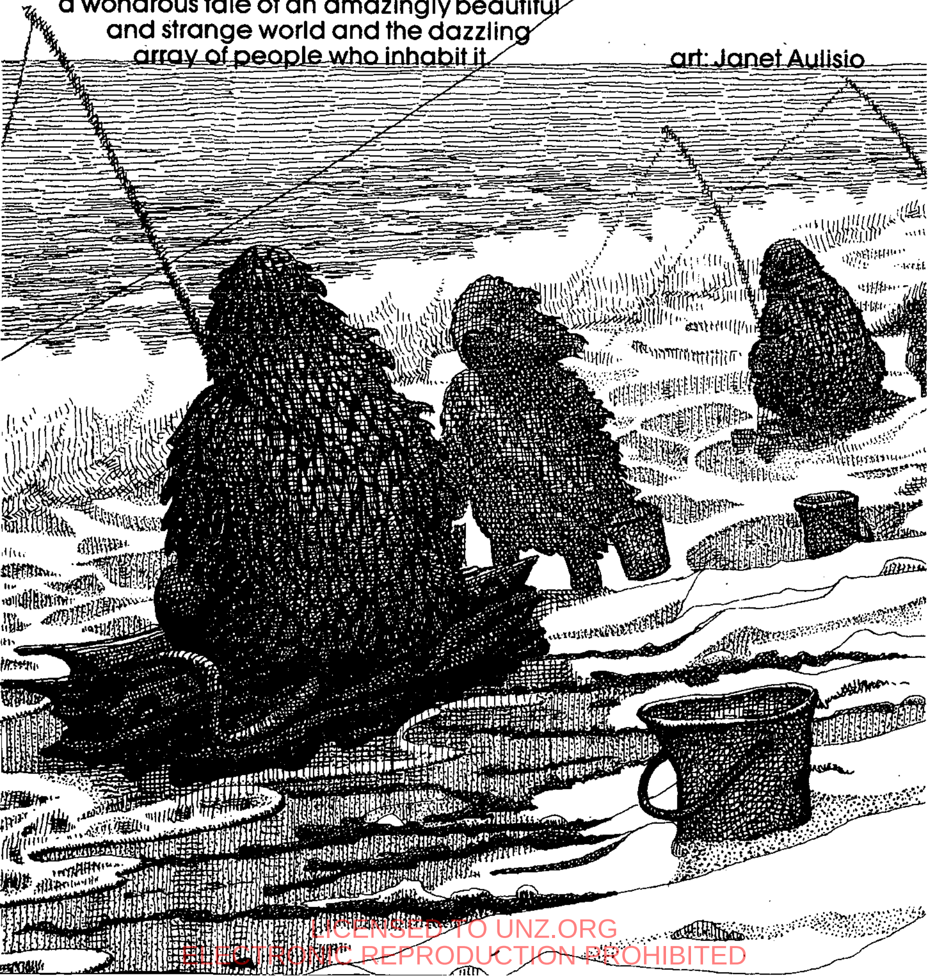
—Scott E. Green

A SHORT, SHARP SHOCK

by Kim Stanley Robinson

The paperback edition of Kim Stanley Robinson's novel, *Escape from Kathmandu*, was released in June by Tor Books, and Tor has just published the author's most recent novel, *Pacific Edge*, in hard cover. In "A Short Sharp Shock," Mr. Robinson spins a wondrous tale of an amazingly beautiful and strange world and the dazzling array of people who inhabit it.

art: Janet Aulisio



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1. The Night Beach

When he came to he was drowning. The water was black and he bobbed up in it swiftly, obscurely aware that it was dangerous to do so, but he was helpless to stop; he tumbled over and swam downward, arms loose and thrusting like tentacles, but it was useless. Air popped out of him in a stream of white bubbles that flattened and shimmied as they squashed upward, all clustered around bearing him to the surface. He glanced up, suddenly aware of the idea of surface; and there it was, an undulating sheet of obsidian silk on which chips of raw silver skittered wildly back and forth. A flock of startled birds turning all at once—no—it was, he thought as the world began to roar, the shattered image of a crescent moon. At the thought a whole cosmology bloomed in him—

And broke apart like the moon's image, as he crashed up into the air and gasped. He flailed at the water whooping and kicking hard to stay afloat; he felt a wave lift him and flopped around to face it. A cold smack in the face and he tumbled again, thrashed through a somersault and came up breathing, barking like a seal to suck in more air.

The next time under he rammed a sandbar and then he was rolling on a steep shorebreak, sluiced by sandy water and struck repeatedly by small silver fish. He crawled up through rushing foam, mouth full of salty grit, hands sinking wrist-deep in the wet sand. The little fish leaped in the phosphorescent foam, banged into his arms and legs. The beach was bouncing with silver fish, it was like an infestation of insects. On hands and knees he couldn't avoid squashing some into the sand.

At the high water mark he collapsed. He looked across a gleaming black strand, filigreed with sea foam receding on a wave. Coarse-grained sand sparked with reflected moonlight, and the fish arched to the shape of the crescent moon, which hung over the horizon at the end of a mirrorflake path of water. Such a dense, intricate, shifting texture of black and white—

A large wave caught him, rolled him back down among the suffocating fish. He clawed the sand without effect, then slammed into another body, warm and as naked as he was. The receding wave rushed down to the triple ripple of the low water mark, leaving them behind: he and a woman, a woman with close-cropped hair. She appeared senseless and he tried to pull her up, but the next wave knocked them down and rolled them like driftwood. He untangled himself from her and got to his knees, took her arms and pulled her up the wet sand, shifting one knee at a time, the little silver fish bouncing all around them. When he had gotten her a few body lengths into dry sand he fell beside her. He couldn't move.

From down the beach came shrill birdy cries. Children ran up to them shouting, buckets swinging at the ends of their arms like great deformed hands. When they ran on he could not move his head to track them. They returned to his field of vision, with taller people whose heads scraped the moon. The children dashed up and down the strand on the lace edge of the waves. They dumped full buckets of wriggling silver leaves in a pile beyond his head. Fire bloomed and driftwood was thrown on it, until transparent gold ribbons leaped up into the night.

Then another wave caught them and rolled them back down to the sea; the tide was rising and they would have perished, but the cords of a thrown net stopped them short, and they were hauled back and dumped closer to the fire, which hissed and sizzled. The children were laughing.

Later, fighting unconsciousness, he lifted the great stone at the end of his neck. The fire had died, the moon sat on the beach. He looked at the woman beside him. She lay on her stomach, one knee to the side. Dry sand stuck to her skin and the moonlight reflecting from her was gritty; it sparkled as she breathed. Powerful thighs met in a rounded muscly bottom, which curved the light into the dip of her lower back. Her upper back was broad, her spine in a deep trough of muscle, her shoulders rangy, her biceps thick. Short-cropped hair, dark under the moon's glaze, curled tight to her head; and the profile glimpsed over one shoulder was straight-nosed and somehow classical: a swimmer, he thought as his head fell back, with the big chest and smooth hard muscling of a sponge diver, or a sea goddess, something from the myths of a world he couldn't remember.

Then her arm shifted out, and her hand came to rest against his flank, and the feel of her coursed all through him: a short, sharp, shock. He caught his breath and found he was sitting up facing her, her palm both cool and warm against his side. He watched her catch the moon on her skin and fling it away.

2. Sea Wrack

When he woke in the morning, the woman was gone. The sun burned just over the water. He lay on a crumbling sand cliff, the high mark of the previous tide's assault on the beach. With his head resting on one ear, he saw a wet slick foam-flecked strand of silvery brown, and the sea; resting on the other, he saw a lumpy expanse of blond beach, dotted with driftwood. Behind the beach was a forest, which rose steeply to a very tall cliff of white stone; its top edge made a brilliant border with the deep blue sky above.

He lifted his head and noticed that the sand cliff under him was a tiny model of the granite cliff standing over the forest—a transient replica, already falling into the sea. But then again the immense rock cliff was also falling into the sea, the forest its beach, the beach its strand. It repeated the little sand cliff's dissolution on a scale of time so much vaster that the idea of it made him dizzy. The tide ebbs and the stars die.

On the wet strand a troop of birds ran back and forth. They seemed a kind of sandpiper, except their feathers were a dark metallic red. They stabbed away at dead grunion rolling in the wrack, and then dashed madly up the strand chased by waves, their stick legs pumping over blurred reflections of themselves. They made one of these frantic cavalry charges right under a thick white fishing line; surprised at the sight, he raised himself up on his elbows and looked behind him.

A surf fisher sat on a big driftwood log. In fact there were several of them, scattered down the beach at more or less regular intervals. The one closest to him was all in brown, an old brown woman in a baggy coat and floppy hat, who waved briefly at him and did not stir from her log.

He stood and walked to her. Beside her a bucket stood on the sand, filled with the little silver fish from the previous night. She gestured at the bucket, offering him some of the fish, and he saw that her hand was a thick mass of shiny dark brown, her fingers long tubes of lighter hollow brown, with bulbs at their ends. Like tubes of seaweed. And her coat was a brown frond of kelp, and her face a wrinkled brown bulb, popped by the slit of her mouth; and her eyes were polyps, smooth and wet.

An animated bundle of seaweed. He knew this was wrong, but there she sat, and the sun was bright and it was hard to think. Many things inside his head had broken or gone away. He felt no particular emotion. He sat on the sand beside her fishing pole, trying to think. There was a thick tendril that fell from her lower back to her driftwood log, attaching her to it.

He found he was puzzled. "Were you here last night?" he croaked.

The old woman cackled. "A wild one. The stars fell and the fish tried to become birds again. Spring." She had a wet hissing voice, a strange accent. But it was his language, or a language he knew. He couldn't decide if he knew any others or not.

She gestured again at her bucket, repeating her offer. Noticing suddenly the pangs of his hunger, he took a few grunion from the bucket and swallowed them.

When he had finished he said, "Where is the woman who washed up with me?"

She jerked a thumb at the forest behind them. "Sold to the spine kings."

"Sold?"

"They took her, but they gave us some hooks."

He looked up at the stone cliff above the trees, and she nodded.

"Up there, yes. But they'll take her on to Kataptron Cove."

"Why not me?"

"They didn't want you."

A child ran down the beach toward them, stepping on the edge of the sand cliff and collapsing it with her passage. She too wore a baggy frond coat and a floppy hat. He noticed that each of the seated surf fishers had a child running about in its area. Buckets sat on the sand like discarded party hats. For a long time he sat and watched the child approach. It was hard to think. The sunlight hurt his eyes.

"Who am I?" he said.

"You can't expect me to tell you that," the fisherwoman said.

"No." He shook his head. "But I. . . . I don't know who I am."

"We say, the fish knows it's a fish when we yank it into the air."

He got to his feet, laughed oddly, waited for the blood to return to his head. "Perhaps I'm a fish, then. But . . . I don't know what's happened to me. I don't know what happened."

"Whatever happened, you're here." She shrugged and began to reel in her line. "It's now that matters, we say."

He considered it.

"Which way is the cove you mentioned?" he said at last.

She pointed down the beach, away from the sun. "But the beach ends, and the cliff falls straight into the sea. It's best to climb it here."

He looked at the cliff. It would be a hard climb. He took a few more grunion from the bucket. Fellow fish, dead of self-discovery. The seaweed woman grubbed in a dark mass of stuff in the lee of her log, then offered him a skirt of woven seaweed. He tied it around his waist, thanked her and took off across the beach.

"You'd better hurry," she called after him. "Kataptron Cove is a long way west, and the spine kings are fast."

3. The Spine

The forest was thick and damp, with leaves scattered at every level, from the rotting logs embedded in the carpet of ferns to the sunbroken ceiling of leaves overhead. Streams gurgled down the slope, but apparently it had not rained for some time, as smaller creekbeds held only trickles; one served him as a pebble-bottomed trail, broken by networks of exposed roots. In the cool gloom he hiked uphill, moving from glade to glade as if from one green room to the next, each sculpted according to a different theory of space and color. Leaves everywhere gave proof of his eye's infinite depth of field, and all was still except for the water falling to the sea—and an occasional flash in his peripheral vision, birds, perhaps, which he could never quite see.

The forest ended at the bottom of the cliff, which rose overhead like the side of an enormous continent. Boulders taller than the trees were scattered about at the foot of the cliff. Ferns and mosses covered the tumble of rotten granite between boulders. The cliff itself was riven by deep gulleys, which were almost as steep as the buttresses separating them. He clambered between boulders looking for a likely way up, in a constant fine mist: far above waterfalls had broken apart, and to the left against the white rock was a broad faint rainbow.

Just as he was concluding that he would have to scramble up one of the gulleys he came on a trail going up the side of one, beginning abruptly in the ferny talus. The trail was wide enough for two people to walk side by side, and had been hacked out of the granite side wall of the gulley, where it switchbacked frequently. When the side wall became completely vertical, the trail wound out over the buttress to the left and zigzagged up that steep finger of stone, in stubborn defiance of the breathtaking exposure. It was impossible to imagine how the trail had been built, and it was also true that a break anywhere in the supporting walls would have cut the trail as neatly as miles of empty air; but there were no breaks, and the weedless gravel and polished bedrock he walked over indicated frequent use. He climbed as if on a staircase in a dream, endlessly ascending in hairpin turns, until the forest and beach below became no more than green and blond stripes running far as he could see in both directions, between the sunbeaten blue of the ocean and the sunbeaten white of the granite.

Then the cliff laid back, and the trail led straight ahead on an incline that got less and less steep, until he saw ahead a skyline of shattered granite, running right to left as far as he could see. The rock stood stark against the sky. He hurried forward and suddenly he was on the crest of a ridge extending to his left and right, and before him he saw ocean again—ocean far below, spread out in front of him exactly as it was behind. Surprised, he walked automatically to a point where he could see all the way down: a steep cliff, a strip of forest, a strip of sand, the white-on-blue tapestry of breaking waves, the intense cobalt of the sea. He stepped back and staggered a little, trying to look in every direction at once.

He was standing on the crest of a tall peninsula, which snaked through an empty ocean for as far as he could see. It was a narrow ridge of white granite, running roughly east to west, bisecting the blue plate of the sea and twice marring the circular line of the horizon. The ridge rose to peaks again and again, higher perhaps in the talcum of afternoon light to the west; it also undulated back and forth, big S shapes making a frozen sine wave. The horizon was an enormous distance away, so far away that it seemed wrong to him, as wrong as the seaweed woman. In fact the whole prospect was fantastically strange; but there he stood, feeling the wind rake hard over the lichen-stained ridge, watching it shove at low shrubs and tufts of sedge.

It occurred to him that the peninsula extended all the way around the world. A big ocean world, and this lofty ring of rock its only land: he was sure of it. It was as if it were something he remembered.

4. Beauty Is the Promise of Happiness

He roused himself and headed west, thinking that a bend in the peninsula out that way might hide Kataptron Cove. The sun fell just to the right of the rock, slowing as it fell, flattening as if reluctant to touch the horizon, breaking into bands of glowing orange light that stretched until they were sucked down by the sea. The twilight was long, a mauve and purple half day, and he hiked rapidly over the crest's shattered granite, which was studded with crystals of translucent quartz. As he walked over the rough edges of stones, feeling liberty in the twisting ligaments of his ankles, he kept an eye out for some sort of shelter for the night. The trail he had followed onto the spine had disappeared, no doubt because the crest itself served as a broad high trail; but at one point a deep transverse cleft had been filled at a single spot by boulders, confirming his notion that the trail still ran, and would reappear when needed.

So he was not surprised when he came upon a low circular stone hut, next to a small pool of water. In this area stone broke away from the bedrock in irregular plates, and a great number of these had been gathered and stacked in rings that grew successively smaller as they got higher off the ground, until a final large capstone topped things off. The stones had been sized and placed so precisely that it would have been difficult to get more than a fingernail between any two of them. A short chimney made of smaller stones protruded from one side of the roof.

Opening a wooden door in the wall opposite the chimney, he entered and found a wooden shelf circling the interior of the wall. Next to the fireplace was a stack of kindling and logs; other than that the hut was empty. He was without the means to start a fire, and it was fairly warm in any case, so he went back outside and drank from the pool, then sat against the west wall to eat the last of the fisherwoman's grunion, in the final hour of twilight. As the light leaked out of the sky it turned a deep rich blue, dark but not quite black: and across this strangely palpable firmament the stars popped into existence, thousands upon thousands of them, from bright disks that might have been nearby planets to dots so faint that he could only see them by looking slightly to the side. Eventually the sky was packed with stars, so densely that they defined perfectly the dome of sky; and frightened him. "Where I come from there are not so many stars," he said shakily to the hut, and then felt acutely his solitude, and the emptinesses inside his mind, the black membranes he could not penetrate. He retreated into the hut. After a long time lying on the hard wooden shelf, he fell asleep.

Sometime before dawn he was awakened by a crowd of folk banging in the doorway. They held him down and searched under his skirt. They had broad hard hands. Cloaks made of small leaves sewn together clicked in the dark, and it smelled like oranges.

"Are you the spine kings?" he asked, drunk with sleep.

They laughed, an airy sound. One said, "If we were you'd be strangled with your own guts by now."

"Or tossed down the cliff."

The first voice said, "Or both. The spine kings' hello."

They all had lumps on their left shoulders, irregular dark masses that looked like shrubs. They took him out of the hut, and under the sea-colored sky he saw that the lumps were in fact shrubs—miniature fruit trees, it appeared, growing out of their left shoulders. The fruits were fragrant and still reminded him of oranges, although the smell had been altered by the salt tang, made more bitter. Round fruit, in any case, of a washed-out color that in better light might have been pale green.

The members of this group arranged themselves in a circle facing inward, took off their leaf cloaks and sat down. He sat in the circle between two of them, glancing at the shoulder tree to his right. It definitely grew directly out of the creature's skin—the gnarled little roots dove into the flesh just as a wart would, leaving an overgrown fissure between bark and skin.

With a jerk he looked away. It was almost dawn, and the treefolk began singing a low monophonic chant, in a language he didn't recognize. The sky lightened to its day blue, slightly thickened by the sun's absence, and the wind suddenly picked up, as if a door had banged open somewhere—a cool fresh breeze, peeling over the spine in the same moment that the sun pricked the distant gray line of the horizon, a green point stretching to a line of hot yellow and then a band of white fire, throwing the sea's surface into shadow and revealing a scree of low diaphanous cloud. Before the sun had detached itself from the sea each member of the circle had plucked a fruit from the shoulder of the person on their right, and when the sun was clear and the horizon sinking rapidly away from it, they ate. Their bites caused a faint cystalline ringing, and the odor of bitter oranges was strong. He felt his stomach muscles contract, and saliva ran down his throat. The celebrant nearest the sun glanced at him and said, "Treeless here will be hungry."

He almost nodded, but held himself still.

"What's your name?" the celebrant asked. He had been the first speaker in the hut.

"I don't know."

"No?" The creature considered it. "Treeless will be good enough, then. In our naming language, that is *Thel.*"

In his mind he called himself Thel. But his real name . . . black space behind his nose, in the sky under his skull. . . . "It will do here," he said, and waved a hand. "It is accurate enough."

The man laughed. "So it is. I am Julo." He looked across the circle. "Garth, come here."

A young man stood. He had been sitting opposite Julo, facing out from the circle, and now Thel noticed his tree grew from the right shoulder rather than the left.

"This is Garth, which means Rightbush. Garth, give Thel here an apple." Garth hesitated, and Julo strode across the circle of watchers and cuffed him on the arm. "Do it!"

Garth approached Thel and stood before him, looked down. Thel said to him, "Which should I choose?"

With a grateful glance up the youth indicated the largest fruit, on a lower branch. Thel took the round green sphere in his fingers and pulled sharply, noting Garth's involuntary wince. Then he sniffed the stem, and bit through the skin. The bitter taste of orange, he sat in a small dark room, watching the wick of a lamp lit by a match held in long fingers, the flame turned up and burning poorly, in a library with bookcases for walls and a huge old leather globe in one corner. . . . He shook his head, back on the windy dawn spine, Julo's laughter in his ear, behind that a crystalline ringing. A bird hovered in the updraft, a windhover searching the lee cliff for prey. "Thank you," Thel said to Garth.

The treefolk gathered around him, touched his bare shoulders, asked him questions. He had nothing but questions in reply. Who were the spine kings? he asked, and their faces darkened. "Why do you ask?" Julo said. "Why don't you know?"

Thel explained. "The fisherfolk pulled me from the sea. Before that—I don't know. I can't . . ." He shook his head. "They pulled out a woman with me, a swimmer, and sold her to the spine kings." He gestured helplessly, the thought of her painful. Already the memory of her was fading, he knew. But that touch in the moonlight— "I want to find her."

"They have some of our people as well," Julo said. "We're going after them." He reached into his bag and threw Thel a leaf cloak and a pair of leather moccasins with thick soles. "You can come along. They're at Kataptron Cove, for the sacrifices."

The boy's fruit was suddenly heavy on his stomach, and he shuddered as if every cell in him had tasted something bitter.

5. The Snake and the Tree

The treefolk hiked long and hard, following a line on the broad crest that minimized the ups and downs, nearly running along a rock road that Thel judged to be some three thousand feet above the sea. After a few days the south side of the sinuous peninsula became a fairly gentle slope, cut by ravines and covered with tall redwood trees; in places on this side the beach was a wide expanse, dotted with ponds and green with rippling dune grass. The north side, on the other hand, remained a nearly vertical cliff, falling directly into waves, which slapped against the rock unbroken and sent bowed counterwaves back out to the north, stippling the blue surface of the water with intersecting arcs.

Once their ridge road narrowed, and big blocky towers of pink granite stood in their way. The trail reappeared then, on the sunny southern slope, and they followed it along a contoured traverse below the boulders, passing small pools that looked hacked into the rock. Half a day of this and they had passed the sharp peaks and were back on the ridge, looking ahead down its back as it snaked through the blue ocean. "How long is this peninsula?" Thel asked, but they only stared at him.

Every morning at sunrise, Julo ordered young Garth to provide a shoulder apple for Thel's consumption, and in the absence of any other food Thel accepted it and ate hungrily. He saw no more hallucinations, but each time experienced a sudden flush of pinkness in his vision, and felt the bitter tang of the taste to his bones. His right shoulder began to ache as he lay down to sleep. He ignored it and hiked on. He noticed that on cloudy days his companions hiked more slowly, and that when they stopped by pools to rest on those days, they took off their boots and stuck their feet between cracks in the rock, looking weary and relaxed.

Some days later the peninsula took a broad curve to the north, and for the first time the sun set on the south side of it. They stopped at a hut set on a particularly high knob on the ridge, and Thel looked around at the peninsula, splitting the ocean all the way to the distant horizon. It was a big world, no doubt of it; and the days and nights were much longer than what he had been used to, he was sure. He grew tired at midday, and often woke for a time in the middle of the long nights. "It doesn't make sense," he said to Garth, waving perplexed at the mountainous mound zigzagging across the sea. "There isn't any geological process that could create a feature like this."

This was said almost in jest, given the other more important mysteries of his existence. But Garth stared at him, eyes feverish. He was lying exhausted, his feet deep in a crack; seeing this in the evenings Thel always resolved not to eat, and every morning he awoke too ravenous to refuse. Now, as if to pay Garth back with conversation, he added, "Land floats like wood, thick cakes of it drifting on slow currents of melted rock below, and a peninsula like this, as tall as this . . . I suppose it could be a mid-oceanic ridge, but in that case it would be volcanic, and this is all granite. I don't understand."

Garth said, "It's here, so it must be possible."

Thel laughed. "The basis of your world's philosophy. You didn't tell me you were a philosopher."

Garth smiled bitterly. "Live like me and you too will become one. Maybe it's happening already, eh? Maybe before you swam ashore you didn't concern yourself with questions like that."

"No," Thel said, considering it. "I was always curious. I think." And to Garth's laugh: "So it feels, you see. Perhaps not everything is gone." It seemed possible that the questions came from the shattered side of his mind, from some past self he couldn't recall but which shaped his thinking anyway. "Perhaps I studied rock." Though it seemed a strange enterprise.

At sunset the wind tended to die, just as the sunrise quickened it; now it slackened. Perhaps I have died like the wind, he thought; perhaps the only thing that survives after death are the questions, or the habit of questioning.

The two of them watched the sun sink, just to the left of the bump of the spine on the horizon. "It's as if it's a river in reverse," Thel said. "If a deep river ran across a desert land, and then you reversed the landscape, water and earth, you would get something that looked like this."

"The earth river," Garth said. "The priests of the birdfolk call it that."

"Are there any tributaries? Any lakes-turned-into-islands?"

"I've never seen any."

The air darkened and the salt air grew chill. Garth was breathing deeply, about to fall asleep, when he said in a voice not his, a voice pleasant but at the same time chilling: "Through mirrors we see things right way round at last."

In the days that followed, this image of a landscape in reverse haunted Thel, though in the end it explained nothing. The stony spine continued to split the water, and it got taller, the south side becoming as steep as the north again. In places they walked on a strip of level granite no wider than a person, and on each side the cliffs plunged some five thousand feet into white foam tapestries that shifted back and forth over deep water, as if something below the blue were lightly breathing: it disturbed one's balance to look down at it, and though the strip was wide enough to walk on comfortably, the sheer airiness of it gave Thel vertigo. Garth walked over it with a pinched expression, and Julo laughed at him, cuffed him hard so that he had to go to his knees to avoid falling over the side; then Julo forced him to walk backward, which served the others as amusement.

Eventually the north side grew less steep, laying out until the peninsula was wider than ever. In this section a hot white cliff faced south, a cool forested slope faced north. On the north slope were scattered stands of enormous evergreens, the tallest trees three or four hundred feet high. One of these giants stood on a ledge just below the crest, and had grown up above the ridge, where the winds had flattened it so that its branches grew horizontally in all directions, some laying over the ridge, others fanning out into the air over the beach and the sea far below.

The treefolk greeted this flat-topped giant as an ancestor, and clambered out over the horizontal branches to the tree's mighty trunk, over it, and out the other side. They ended up on three or four lightning-blasted gnarly branches, ten feet wide and so solid that jumping up and down would not move them, though the whole tree swayed gently in a fitful west wind. Big shallow circular depressions had been cut into the tops of these branches, and the exposed wood had been polished till it gleamed.

They spent the night in these open-roofed rooms, under the star-flooded sky. By starlight Thel looked at the wood by his head and saw the grain of centuries of growth exposed. The peninsula had been here for thousands of years, millions of years—both the plant life and the erosion of the granite showed that. But how had it begun? "When you talk among yourselves about the spine," he said to the treefolk, "do you ever talk about where it came from? Do you have a story that explains it?"

Julo was looking down into the grain of the floor beneath him, still and rapt as if he had not heard Thel; but after a while he said, in a low voice, "We tell a story about it. Traveling in silent majesty along their ordered ways, the gods tree and snake were lovers in the time without time. But they fell into time, and snake saw a vision of a lover as mobile as he, and he chased round the sky until he saw the vision was his own tail. He bit the tail in anger and began to bleed, and his blood flowed out into a single great drop, bound by the circle his long body made. He died of the loss, and tree climbed on his back and drove her roots deep into his body, trying to feed his blood into him, trying to bring him back to life, and all her acorns dropped and grew to join in the attempt. And here we are, accidents of her effort, trying to help her as we can, and some day the snake will live again, and we will all sail off among the stars, traveling in silent majesty."

"Ah," Thel said. And then: "I see."

But he didn't see, and he arranged himself for sleep and looked up into the thickets of stars, disappointed. Garth lay next to him, and much later, when the others were asleep, Garth whispered, "You don't know where you came from. You have no idea how you came here or what you are. Worry about that, and when you know those things, then worry about the great spine."

6. Kataptron Cove

The next dawn it was bitterly cold out on the swaying branches, and they sat back against the curved wall of the biggest room shivering as Julo watched the sky to determine the exact moment of sunrise, hidden behind the ridge. When he turned to pluck the fruit from the man next to him he took three, and the others did the same. Thel restricted himself to his usual one of Garth's, and asked him why the others had eaten more.

"We'll reach Kataptron Cove this evening."

And so they did. It was on the south side, in an arc the peninsula made. Here the granite side of the peninsula was marred by the shattered walls of a small crater—a horseshoe ring of jagged black rock, extending into the sea and broken open to it at its outermost point, so that the inside of the crater was a small lagoon. Clearly it was an old volcanic vent, and as it was the first sign of vulcanism that Thel had seen, he approached it with interest. But he was soon distracted by the grim faces of the treefolk, who marched around him as if going into battle. Foreboding charged the air, and the treefolk abandoned the trail that descended the southern slope in a long traverse to the crater bay, and struggled through dense woods above the trail.

They descended into thick salt air filled with the sound of waves, gliding from tree to tree like spirits, moving very slowly onto the high crumbly rim of the crater, overlooking the inner lagoon. The curving inner wall of the crater was a reddish cliff, overgrown with green. Where the crater met the spine a stream fell down the inner wall and across the sand into the lagoon; on the banks of the stream there was a permanent camp, built in a grove of trees that had been cleared of undergrowth. In the shadows of these trees people moved, and smoke spiraled up through the sunbeams lancing among the branches.

In the depths of the grove there was a hubbub, and a crowd emerged onto the open beach, a gang wearing leather skirts and belted short swords, and tight golden helmets. They chivvied along a short row of prisoners, naked and in chains, and Thel heard Garth whimper softly. He looked around and saw that the treefolk had their eyes fixed on the beach in horror, and unwilling fascination. "What is it?" he said.

Garth pointed at where the grove met the beach. Two tall tree trunks standing beside each other had been stripped bare; behind the trunks stood a platform about half their height. "It's the flex X," Garth whispered, and would not elaborate. He sat with his back to the scene, head in hands.

Thel and the rest of the treefolk watched as a prisoner was hauled up the steps of the platform. Two crews on the ground set about winding ropes tied to the top of each treetrunk, until the trunks were crossing each other at about the level of the platform. Intuitively Thel understood the function of the large bowed X the trees made, and his stomach contracted to a hard knot of tension and vicarious terror; still he watched as the first prisoner was tied to the two trees, and the thick ropes holding the trees in position were knocked off notched stumps, and the two tall trunks returned to an upright position, with a stately swaying motion that had not the slightest hitch in it when the prisoner was ripped apart. Blood fountained from the head and the body, now separated. Thel saw that the beach around the two trees was littered with lumps here and there, all a dark brown, now splattered with red: the wreckage of lives.

At that distance people were the size of dolls, and they heard nothing of them over the sounds of waves. The executioners tied each prisoner to the two trees in a different manner, so that the second came apart at the limbs, and the third in the middle, leaving a long loop of intestine hanging between the two poles.

Thel found he was sitting. His skin was covered with a sour sweat. He felt cold. He moved in front of Garth, took his face in his hands. "The spine kings?"

Garth nodded miserably.

"Who are they?"

No response. Feeling the futility of the question, Thel stood and went to Julo, who laughed maliciously as he saw Thel's face.

"What will you do?" Thel asked.

"Go have a look. They'll be drinking tonight, they'll all get drunk and there'll be little watch kept. They fear no one in any case. We can be quiet, and some of us will go have a look for our kind. If we can find them, we can see what kind of lock they're under. It may be possible to slip them out on a night like this. We're lucky to have seen that," he said, ironic to the point of snarling. "We know they'll be off guard."

Thel nodded, impressed despite himself by Julo's courage. "I want to come with you," he said. "I can look for the swimmer."

"She'll be under stronger guard," Julo warned him. "But you're welcome to try. It's why you're here, right?"

7. Two Xs

So in the long indigo twilight they made their way around the rim of the crater bay like ghosts, stepping so silently that the loudest sound coming from them was their heartbeats, tocking at the backs of their open mouths. Shadows with heartbeats, as silent as the fear of death, slipping from trunk to trunk and searching the forest ahead with the acute gaze of hunted beasts . . . the spine king sentinels carried crossbows, Julo had said. They descended the crater wall well away from the village, and then worked their way back to it through a thin forest of pines, stepping across a carpet of brown needles.

Ahead came the sound of voices, and the beach stream. The leaves of the treefolk's shoulder bushes rustled when they moved too quickly. It was getting dark, the color draining out of everything except the pinpricks of fire dancing in the black needles ahead.

Drumming began, parodying their heavy heartbeats. They hugged the crater wall, circled to the edge of a firelit clearing. In the clearing were huts, cages, and platforms, all made of straight branches with the bark still on them. Some of the cages held huddled figures.

Thel froze. Reflection of torchlight from a pair of eyes, the shaggy head of a wild beast captured and caged, brilliant whites defiant and exhausted: it was her. Thel stared and stared at the black lump of the body, heavy in the dark, clothed only in dirt—the tangled hair backlit by fire—eyes reflecting torchlight. He had no idea why he was so certain. But he knew it was the swimmer.

The treefolk were clustered around him. When guards with torches arrived in the clearing, the prisoners sat up, and around him Thel heard a faint rustling of leaves. He peered more closely and saw that the cage beside the swimmer's held seated figures, slumped over. One of them begged for water and the guards approached. In the sharply flickering torchlight Thel could see slack faces, eyes shut against the light, odd hunched shoulders—ah. Trunks, stalks, stumps: their shoulder bushes had been chopped off. One of the captured treefolk, lying flat on the ground, was hauled up; he still had his little tree, its fruit gone, its leaves drooping. "The fire's low," one guard said drunkenly, and drew his short broad sword and hacked away. It took several blows, *thunk, thunk,* the victim weeping, his companions listless, looking away, the other guards holding the victim upright and steady and finally bending the trunk of the miniature tree until it broke with a dull crack. The victim flopped to the ground and the guards left the cage and tossed the little tree onto the embers of a big fire: it flared up white and burned well for several minutes, as if the wood were resinous.

Thel's companions had watched this scene without moving; only the rustle of leaves betrayed their distress. The guards left and they slipped back into the black forest, and Thel followed them. When they showed no signs of stopping he crashed forward recklessly, and pulled at Julo's arm; when Julo shrugged him off and continued on, Thel reached out and grabbed the trunk of Julo's shoulder tree and yanked him around, and then had to defend himself immediately from a vicious rain of blows, which stopped only when the other treefolk threw themselves between the two, protesting in anxious mutters, whispering *shh, shh, shhh.*

"What are you doing?" Thel cried softly.

"Leaving," Julo said between his teeth.

"Aren't you going to free them?"

"They're dead." Julo turned away, clearly too disgusted and furious to discuss it further. With a fierce chopping gesture he led the others away.

"What about the swimmer?"

They didn't stop. Suddenly the black forest seemed filled with distant voices, with drunken bodies crashing into underbrush, with yellow winking torches bouncing through the trees. Thel backed into a tree, leaned against the shaggy bark. He took deep deliberate breaths. The cage had been made of lashed branches, but out in the center of the clearing like that. . . .

"I'll help you," Garth said out of the darkness, giving Thel a start. "It's me, Garth."

They held each other's forearms in the dark. "You'll lose the others if you stay," Thel said.

"I know," Garth said, voice low and bitter. "You've seen how he treats me. I want to be free of them all, forever. I'll make my own life from now on."

"That's not an easy thing," Thel said.

Without replying Garth turned back the way they had come, and they crept back to the clearing. Once there they lay behind a fallen log and looked into the firelit cages. Garth's fellow folk sat there listlessly.

"Their trees won't grow back?"

"Would your arm?"

"And so they'll die?"

"Yes."

Garth slipped away, and after a time Thel saw an orange light like a sort of firefly bobbing through the trees: Garth, holding a branch tipped by a glowing ember. Thel joined him, and they crept to the back of the treefolk's cage, and Garth held the tip of the branch to the lashings at the bottom of one pole. As they blew on the coal the treefolk inside watched, without a sound or any sign of interest.

Garth begged those inside to emerge, and got no reply. Thel stared at the orange ember which brightened as they blew on it, embarrassed for Garth, and worried about what he could do alone. When the cage lashing caught fire with a miniature explosion of white flame, Garth looked at his comrades through the smoke and said fiercely, "You know what the spine kings have done to you! You know what they'll do to you next! Come out and exact some revenge, meet your end like trees should. While you do we can rescue a friend who yet lives, and you'll either make a quick end to it, or escape to be free on the great spine when your time comes." He jerked hard on the pole and it came loose. "Come on, get out there among them and remember the part of you they threw on their fires."

One of them started forward and crawled under the lifted pole, and the rest looked at each other, at the raw stumps protruding from their shoulders; they too slipped from the cage. In a moment they had all disappeared into the dark.

"It would be better if we had something else for the other cage," Garth said to Thel. "The ember is dying."

"There are a lot more in the fire."

"My kin's lives."

"They can free these others."

Garth nodded. "We burn hot. But one of those swords they carry would be helpful." And he disappeared again.

Thel waited, as near the swimmer's cage as he could get without emerging into the light. From the hut beside the bonfire and the central cage came the sounds of laughter, then those of an argument turning ugly. Around him in the forest were odd noises, sudden silences, and he imagined the treeless treefolk wandering murderously in the dark, jumping drunken guards as they stumbled off to piss in the trees, bludgeoning them and then stealing their swords to slip between the ribs of others. The spine kings feared no one and now they would pay, ambushed in their own village in the midst of their death bacchanal. Sick with images of brutal murder, keyed to the highest pitch of tension, Thel leaped to his feet involuntarily as a crash and cries came from the direction of the beach, and the guards in the clearing's hut rushed out and down a path. "The platform!" someone was shouting in the distance as Thel ran to the bonfire and snatched up a brand. Sparks streamed in a wide arc from the burning end as he ran to the cage and crushed the burning end of the branch against the lashings at the bottom of a pole. This cage was better constructed and it was going to take longer. A twig cracked behind him and the swimmer croaked a warning; he swung the brand around and caught an onrushing guard in the face. The guard's raised broadsword flew into the cage, cutting one prisoner who cried out; the guard himself couldn't do more than grunt, as Thel beat him furiously across the neck and head. When Thel turned back to the cage the prisoners had cut the lashing with the sword and were squeezing out of the cage and cursing one another under their breath. Thel took the swimmer woman by the arm and pulled her out; she was thicker than the others and barely fit through the gap. She appeared dazed, but when Thel held her face in his hands and caught her eye, she recognized him. Garth had reappeared, and Thel was about to lead the swimmer out of the clearing when one of the other prisoners said urgently, "Wonderful saviors, thank you eternally, please, follow me, I know where the trailhead is that leads up to the spine!" So they followed him, but it seemed to Thel he went straight for the center of the camp.

Shrieks cut the night and torches had been tossed high into the trees, some of which had caught fire and become great torches themselves, so that there was far too much light for their purpose. "Wait one moment please," the prisoner who claimed to know the way said, and he ran into the largest house in the camp.

Apparently some of the treefolk amputees had found the flex X and set it alight. The crater wall enclosing the lagoon appeared out of the darkness, faintly illuminated by the burning village. Sparks wafted among the stars, it seemed the cosmos was winking out fire by fire. The prisoner ran out of the house carrying a sack. "Follow me now," he cried jubilantly, "and run for your lives!"

They ran after him. Thel took the swimmer by the arm, determined not to lose her in the mayhem. But now the prisoner was true to his word, and he led them through firebroken shadows to a wide cobbled trail, ignoring the shouts and cries around them. The trail ran up to the crater's rim and then along it, to the point where the crater wall diverged from the great slope of the spine ridge. The trail began to switchback up the slope. Looking across an arc of the lagoon they saw the village dotted with burning trees and smaller patches of fire, the flex X burning high on a beach glossy as a seal's back, and there were two images of everything: one burning whitely over the beach, another, inverted, burning a clear yellow in the calm black water of the bay.

8. The Mirror

Afraid of the spine kings' pursuit, they ran the trail west for many days, scarcely pausing to loot caches located by the prisoner who led them. The caches contained clothing and shoes, and also buried jugs of dried meat and fruit, lumps so hard and dry they couldn't tell what anything was until chewing it; good food, but because there were seven of them they were still hungry. "We'll come to my village soon," the prisoner said one evening after doling out a meager dinner, and outfitting Thel and the swimmer in pants and tunics, and boots that were a lucky fit. The prisoner's name was Tinou, and he had a wonderful big smile; he seemed astonished and delighted to have escaped the spine kings, and often he thanked Thel and Garth for their rescue. "When we get there we'll eat like the lords of the ocean deep."

The sun had set an hour before, and a line of clouds over the western horizon was the pink of azaleas, set in a sky the color of lapis. The seven sat around a small fire: Thel, the swimmer, Garth, Tinou, and three women. These women all had faces cast in the same mold, and a strange mold it was; where their right eye should have been the skin bulged out into another, smaller face, lively and animated, with features that did not look like the larger one around it—except for the fact that its own little right eye was again replaced by a face, a very little face—which had an even tinier face where its right eye should have been, and so on and so on, down in a short curve to the limit of visibility, and no doubt beyond.

This oddity made the three women's faces impressive and even frightening, and because the three full-sized faces seldom spoke, Thel always felt that when talking to them he was really conversing with one of the smaller faces—perhaps the very smallest, beyond the limit of visibility—who might reply in a tiny high squeak at any time.

But now the three women stood before Tinou, and one said, "We want to know what you took from Kataptron Cove."

"I took this bag," Tinou said, "and it's mine."

"It is all of ours," the middle woman said, her voice heavy and slow. Her companions moved to Tinou's sides. "Show us what it is."

In the dusk it was hard to tell if expressions or firelight were flickering across Tinou's long and mobile face. Thel and the swimmer leaned forward together to see better this small confrontation, and Tinou flashed them his friendly smile. "I suppose there is justice in that," he said, and picked up his shoulder bag. Untying the drawstring he said, "Here," and slipped something out of the bag, a small shiny plate of some sort.

"Gold," the middle facewoman said.

Tinou nodded. "Yes, in a manner of speaking. But it is more that, in fact. It is a mirror, see?"

He held it up—a round smooth mirror with no rim, the glass of it golden rather than silver. Held up against the dark eastern sky it gleamed like a lamp, revealing a rich blue line in a field of pink.

"It is no ordinary mirror," Tinou said. "My people will reward us generously when we arrive with it, I assure you."

He put it back in the bag, and for a moment it seemed to Thel he was stuffing light into the bag as well, until with a hard jerk he closed the drawstring. Wind riffled over them, below lay the calm surface of the sea, and in the east the moon rose, its blasted face round and brilliant; looking from it to the quick yellow banners of their fire, Thel suddenly felt he walked in a world of riches. Night beach and big-handed children, running the mirrorflake road on the sea. . . .

The next dawn they were off again. At first Thel had been shy of the swimmer, even a bit frightened of her; she couldn't know how important her image had been to him before the rescue, and he didn't know what to say to her. But now he walked behind her or beside her, depending on the width of the trail, and as they walked he asked her questions. Who was she? What did she remember from before the night they had washed onto the beach? What had gotten them to that point under the water? What was her name?

She only shook her head. She remembered the night on the beach; beyond that she was unable to say. She concentrated her gaze on her long feet, which seemed to have trouble negotiating the rock, and rarely looked at him. He didn't mind. It was a comfort to be walking with her and to know that someone shared the mystery of his arrival on the peninsula. She was a fellow exile, moving like a dancer caught in heavier gravity than she was used to, and it was a pleasure just to watch her as the sun roasted her brown hair white at the tips, and burned her pale skin red-brown. Often aspects of her reminded Thel of that first night: the set of her rangy shoulders, the profile of her long nose. With speech or without, she reassured him.

So they moved westward, and the peninsula got steep and narrow again, the granite as hard as iron and a gray near black, flecked with rose quartz nodules. The dropoffs on both sides became so extreme that they could see nothing but a short curved slope of rock, and then ocean, a few thousand feet below. Tinou told them that here the walls of the sea cliffs were concave, so that they walked on a tube of rock that rested on a thin vertical sheet of stone, layered like an onion; in some places, he said, the two cliffsides had fallen away to nothing, so that they walked on arches over open holes, called the Serpent's Gates. "If you were on the tide trail, you could climb up into them and sit under a giant rainbow of stone, the wind howling through the hole."

Instead they tramped a trail hacked waist-deep into the dense dark rock, to give some protection from falls. Every day Tinou said they were getting close to his village, and to support the claim the trail changed under their feet, shifting imperceptibly from barely touched broken rock to a loose riprap, and then to cobblestones set in rings of concentric overlapping arcs, and finally, early one morning shortly after they started off, to a smoothly laid mosaic, made of small polished segments of the rose quartz. Longer swirls of dark hornblende were set into this pink road, forming letters in a cursive alphabet, and Tinou sang out the words they spelled in a jubilant tenor, the "Song of Mystic Arrival in Oia" as he explained, fluid syllables like the sound of a beach stream's highest gurgling.

Then they came over a rise in the ridge, and there facing the southern sea, tucked in a steep scoop in the top of the cliff, was a cluster of whitewashed blocky buildings, lined in tight rows so that the narrow lanes were protected from the wind. Terrace after terrace cut the incurved slope, until it reached an escarpment hanging over the sea; from there a white staircase zigzagged down a gully to a tiny harbor below, three white buildings and a dock, gleaming like a pendant hanging from Oia.

9. The Sorcerers of Oia

A crowd greeted them as they entered the village, men and women convening almost as though by coincidence, as though if Tinou and his retinue had not appeared they would have gathered anyway; but when they saw Tinou they smiled, for the most part, and congratulated him on his return. "Not many escape the spine kings," one woman said, and laughing the others crushed in on them to touch Tinou and his companions, while Tinou sang the trail's mosaic song, ending with an exuberant leap in the air.

"I thought I would never return here again," he cried, "and I never would have if not for Thel here, who slipped into the spine kings' village the night we were to be torn apart on the crossing trees. He set us free, he saved our lives!" Jubilantly he embraced Thel, then added, "He made it possible for all of us to return to Oia—" and he took the mirror out of his shoulder bag.

Silence fell, and the crowd seemed both to step back and to press in at once. Thel thought he could hear the sound of the sea, murmuring far below. A woman dressed in a saffron dress said, "Well, Tinou, your return was one thing, but *this*—"

General laughter, and then they were being led into the narrow streets of the village. These either contoured across town, making simple arcs, or ascended it in steep marble staircases, each step bowed in the middle from centuries of wear. Every lane and alley was lined by blocky whitewashed buildings, often painted with the graceful cursive lettering. By the time they came to a tiny plaza on the far side of the village, the sun was low on the horizon, it broke under clouds and suddenly every west wall was as gold as Tinou's mirror, and many of the west-facing windows were blinding white.

Restaurants ringed the plaza, each sporting a cluster of outdoor tables, and as dusk seeped into things lanterns were hung in small gnarled trees or put on windowsills, and the people ate and drank long into the night. Thel and the swimmer and the three facewomen ate voraciously, and became drunk on the fiery spirits poured for them, and the villagers danced, their long pantaloons and dresses swirling like the colors in a kaleidoscope, yards of cloth spinning under strong wiry naked torsos, both men and women dancing like gods, so that the watchers were shocked when a bottle shattered and the color of blood spurted into their field of vision, off to the side; a fight, quickly broken up, overridden by the gaiety of the sorcerers of Oia. The mirror was back.

In the days that followed, the celebration continued. Eventually it became clear that this was the permanent state of things in Oia, that this was the way the sorcerers lived. They poured sea water into stone vats, and later drew their spirits from taps at the vats' bottoms. Sea lions brought them their daily fish in exchange for drinks of this liquor; the creatures swam right up to the dock at the cliff bottom, barking hoarsely as they deposited long three-eyed fish on the dock. Later the sorcerers turned some of the fish meat into tough dark red steak, which tasted nothing like the flaking fish. Their gardens and goats were tended by their children—and in short, they lived lives of leisure, playing complex games, undergoing abstruse studies, and performing rituals and ceremonies. Tinou took his fellow travelers with him wherever he went, and introduced them as his saviors, and they were feted to exhaustion.

One day to escape it Thel and the swimmer walked down the staircase trail that switchbacked precipitously to the sea. On the way they passed grown-over foundations, and roofless walls filled with weeds: vestiges of earlier Oias, shaken by earthquakes into the sea. On the dock below some of the sorcerers stood talking to the sea lions, taking their bloody catch and pouring tankards of the liquor down their throats. Even their vilest imprecations couldn't keep a flock of gulls away, and the gulls wheeled overhead crying madly until the barking sea lions breeched far into the air, thick sleek sluglike bodies twisting adroitly as they snagged birds and crushed them in their small powerful mouths. Eventually the gulls departed and the lions swam off, a wrack of feathered corpses left on the groundswell.

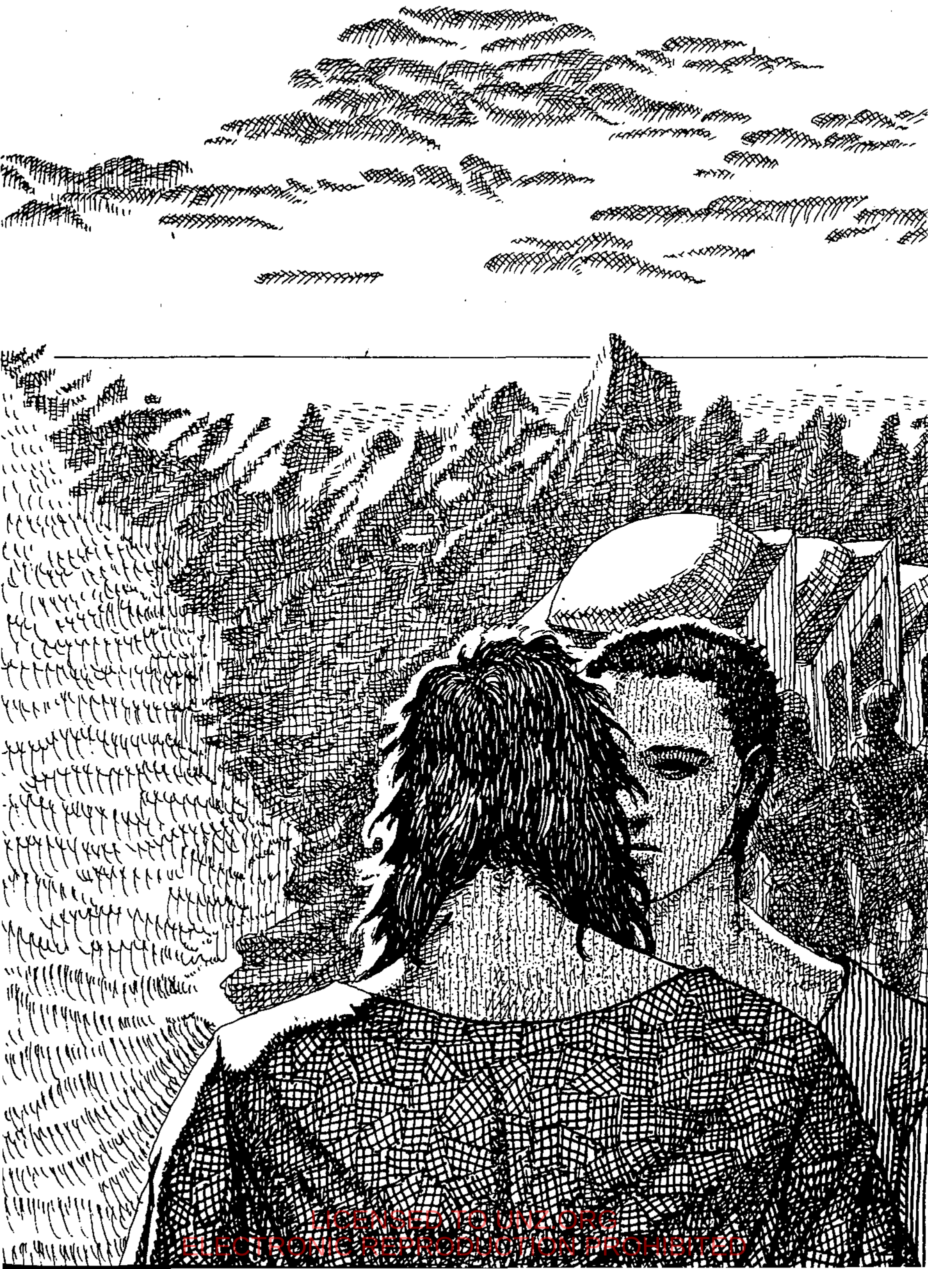
After they were gone, Thel and the swimmer shed their garments and dove in. Underwater Thel became instantly afraid, but the sight of the swimmer stroking downward was somehow familiar, and strangely reassuring. He stayed under for as long as he could hold his breath, and then joined her in bodysurfing the groundswells that rose up to strike the cliffs. As the two rode the waves they remained completely inside the water, surfing as the sea lions did, and they were drawn swiftly forward in the wave until they ducked down and out to avoid crashing into the cliff or the dock. During these rides, slung through the water by two curves of spacetime rushing across each other, Thel would look over at the swimmer's long naked body and feel his own flowing in the water, until it was hard to hold his breath, not because he was winded but because he needed to shout for joy.

When they pulled themselves back onto the worn stones of the dock, Tinou was there, except now he was a woman, laughing in a contralto at their expressions as she stripped and dove in; her face was clearly Tinou's, unmistakeable despite the fact that it was slimmer, more feminine—yet clearly not a sister or twin, no, nothing but Tinou himself, shape-changed into a svelte female form. Thel and the swimmer looked at each other, baffled by this transformation; and halfway through the long climb up the stairs Tinou caught up with them, a man again, coquettishly embracing first the swimmer and then Thel (slim wet arms quick around his shoulders), and then laughing uproariously at their expressions.

That sunset he led them and the facewomen down into the ruins of the previous village. Here broken buildings had dropped their barrel roofs onto their floors, and worn splintered sticks of old furniture still stuck out between the bowed bricks. Other sorcerers set lanterns in a circle around what appeared to be an abandoned plaza, smaller even than the one above, and in the long lavender dusk more of the sorcerers gathered, somber for once and drinking hard. In the sky above a windhover caught the last rays of the sun, a white kestrel turned pink by the sunset, fluttering its wings in the rapid complex pattern that allowed it to stay fixed in the air.

Tinou took the stolen mirror from his bag and set it on a short wooden stand, on the eastern edge of the circle the sorcerers made. Against the starry east it was a circle of pure pink sheen. When Tinou sat down the circle of seated sorcerers was complete, and they began to sing, their faces upturned to the windhover riding the last rays of the sun. The light leaked out of the sky and the wind riffled the enormous space of dusk and the sea, and Thel, surprising himself, feeling the old compulsion, said "As you can change your shape, and bend the world to serve you, perhaps you can tell me how this world came to be the way it is."

They all stared at him. "We have only a story," Tinou said finally in a kind tone, "just like anyone else."



Another voice took over, that of an old woman; but it was impossible to pick out the speaker from the circle of faces. "The universe burst from a bubble the size of an eye, some fifteen billion years ago, and it has been flying apart ever since. It will achieve its maximum reach outward in our lifetimes, and fall back into that eye of density which is God's eye, and then all will begin again, just as it was the time before, and the time before that, eternally. So that every breath that you take has occurred in just that way an infinity of times, and none of us are but statues in time to the eye of God."

"As for this world," said the voice of an old man, a cold, hard voice, "this road of mountain across an empty sea, an equatorial peninsula circumnavigating the great globe: it came about like this.

"Gods fly through space in bubbles of glass, and their powers exceed ours as ours exceed those of the stones we stand on, who know only to endure. And once long ago gods voyaged through this forgotten bay of the night sea, and to pass the time they argued a point of philosophy." And here the speaker's voice grew harsh, the edge of every word sharper, until they were as edged as the taste of Garth's shoulder fruit, sending the same kind of bitter shock through Thel. "They argued aesthetics, the most metaphysical of philosophical problems. One of them said that beauty was a quality of the universe independent of any other, that it was inlaid in the fabric of being like gravity, in a pattern that no one could pull out. Another disagreed: beauty is the ache of mortality, this god said, an attribute of consciousness, and nothing is beautiful except perceived through the love of lost time, so that wherever there is beauty, love was there also, and first."

Here another voice spoke, on the breaking edge of bitterness. "And so they agreed to put it to a test, and being gods and therefore just like us, less ignorant but no less cruel, they decided to transform and populate one of the planets they sailed by, sinking all its land but this spine under an endless sea, and then making what remained as beautiful as they could imagine; but leeching every living thing of love, to see if the beauty would yet remain. And here we are."

Silence. For a moment Thel felt he was falling.

A tray was passed around, and Thel did as the rest and took from it a thin white wafer, feeling a powerful compulsion. He ate it and his skin tingled as if crystallizing. Looking up he thought he could still see the kestrel hovering overhead, a black star among the sparkling white ones. The mirror's surface was a dark lustrous violet now, nothing like the western sky which had grown as dark as the east; as his gaze began to fall into the drop of rich glossy color there was a disturbance across the circle, and one of the sorcerer children burst among them. "The spine kings," she gasped, "at the Thera Gate."

All the sorcerers rose to their feet.

"So," Tinou said, "we must hurry a little."

Quickly several of them seized Thel by the arms and legs; when he struggled he might as well have been thrashing on an iron rack. His skin was shattering. The swimmer and the three facewomen were being held back. Thel was lifted up, carried to the mirror.

Tinou appeared beside him, touched his temple. His smile was solicitous. "My thanks for the rescue," he said jovially, then in more formal tones: "Through mirrors we see things right way round at last."

They shoved his left foot into the surface, which was as smooth as a glass of water full over the rim, completely violet and completely gold at one and the same time; and the foot went in to the ankle. Now he had a left foot made of fire, it seemed, and he twisted in the implacable grip, cried out. Tinou nodded sympathetically, cocked his head. "It's pain most proves we live. Nothing serves better to focus our attention on our bodies and the flesh metronomes ticking inside them, timing the bombs that will go off someday and end the universe. Remember!"

He stepped forward and leaned over Thel's face, looked at him curiously. "There are so many kinds of pain, really." They shoved his leg in to the hip. "Is it pulsing, throbbing, shooting, lancing, cutting, stabbing, scalding? Is it pressing, gnawing, cramping, wrenching, burning, searing, ripping? Is it smarting, stinging, pricking, pounding, itching, freezing, drilling? Is it superficial or profound? Can you think of anything else? Can you tell me what eight times six equals? Can you take a full breath and hold it?"

And with each question Thel was thrust further in. A brief flare of genitals, the sickening twist of the gut, all his skin an organ of pain, every atom of him spinning in vain efforts to fly off—and Tinou, smiling, leaning over his face and questioning still, each word slower, louder, more drawn out: "Is it dull, sore, taut, tender? Is it rasping, splitting, exhausting, sickening? Is it suffocating, frightful, punishing? Vicious, wretched? Blinding? Horrible? Killing? Excruciating? Unbearable?"

Then they got his face to the glossy surface, and the reflected visage within was that of a complete stranger, puffy and thick-necked, eyes bulging out— "I have never looked like that," Thel tried to say, certain he was dying. Compared to this the flex X would have been bliss, he thought, and with one last glimpse of Tinou's laughing face he was through the glass and gone.

10. Through the Mirror

Blue stars ahead, red behind. Flare of an oil lamp in the library. We know more than our senses ever tell us, but how? How? Old brown globe, bookcases, beyond it a glassine sphere, the image of a wall. Milky black of the galactic core, tumbling down, down, down, down. Emergency landing. Emergence. The sensuous rise to consciousness.

Splayed on riprap, the taste of ocean wrack in his throat. Once with his parents he tripped and smashed his nose, vivid image of sunny pain and a chocolate ice cream, down by the canals filled with trash, a glassy sheen like the taste of blood suffusing every sundrenched manifestation of the world. Filled with sudden grief at the lost past, Thel sat up shakily and wiped his nose, spat red. Bloody spit on uneven paving stones, crowded with dead weeds. The whole village of Oia was in ruins, the walls just a block or two high. Dark wind was keening through him and the weeds rustled, it had been centuries and clearly he would never see the swimmer on the night beach again, it was past and irrecoverable. All his past was gone for good, even if he could remember it; given the sense of loss for what little he could remember, it was perhaps for the best that so much was forgotten. But he knew he had had a life, childhood, adolescence, he felt its intensity and knew it would never return no matter what he did, even if he remembered every instant of it perfectly, as he felt he did, all of it right there behind some impermeable membrane in his mind, pressing against his thoughts until the ache of it filled everything.

And yet really it didn't matter if he remembered or not. Live a life and seize it to you with an infant's fierce clench of the fist, it still would slip away as lovely as the mountain sky at dusk and *never come back again*: not the moment in the dim library, the noon by the poolside, that moonlit beach and the warm sandy touch, none of it, none of it, none of it. How he loved his past in that moment, how he wanted it back! Eternal recurrence, as the sorcerers had said; ah, it would almost be worth it to be a clockwork mechanism, a bronze creature of destiny, if you could then have it over and over and over. As long as it felt new at every recurrence, who cared? He was a creature of destiny in any case, impelled by forces utterly beyond his control. To move his forefinger left rather than right was an enormous exertion against fate, anything more was too much to ask, it would be only water splashing uphill for a moment; he would bend to the curve of spacetime at last, which leads to the sea in the end. Fate is the path of least action. And if you never know it is all recurrence then it only means you feel the loss, over and over and over. But he had loved his life, he knew he had, the bad and the good and he wanted to keep it forever, all of it, observe it from some eternal beach and perhaps step back into it, a moment here, a moment there, looking out a bay window at streetlight, bare branch, falling snow, listening to a snatch of piano by the coals of a fire, those moments of being when all the past seemed in him and alive, suffusing the moment and the only moment with a feeling—with every feeling, all at once.

Wind soughed in the weeds. Inside him the flesh metronome went tick, tick. Life slipped away hadon by hadon, limning every joy with a rime of grief; and he walked backward into the future, waving and crying out "Goodbye! Goodbye! Goodbye!"

It was dark. There were only pinprick stars, a dozen at most though the sky was black as an eye's pupil. Shivering with fear, he stood and staggered up one of the marble staircases, now littered with blocks of stone which glowed whitely underfoot, apparently from some internal luminance, so faint it was at the edge of the visible. He was seeing the skeleton of the world.

On the spine the view of both seas was disorienting, literally in that he became aware that the sun would dawn in the west, and that he would have to trek east to new ground to escape the spine kings. Still it was reassuring to see both the oceans, to straddle the high edge of the peninsula, riding the back of the present as it snaked through past and future. He stood there for a minute, savoring the view and the bitter bite of the wind.

Looking back down at the dark luminous ruins of Oia, he saw a figure moving up terrace after terrace, flitting between walls and seeming at times to jump from place to place instantaneously. The figure looked up, and its eyes gleamed like two stars in its dark face. Thel shivered and waited, knowing the figure was coming to join him; and so it did, taking much of the night though it moved rapidly.

Finally it approached him: a man, though it was a man so slight and fluid in his movement that he seemed androgynous, or feminine. His skin was blacker than the sky, so that his smile and the whites of his eyes seemed disembodied above clothing that glowed like the stones of Oia, outlining his slim form. "The spine kings are upon us," he said in a bright, friendly voice. "Side-stepping them only works for so long. If you want to escape you'll have to move fast. I can show you the way."

"Lead on," Thel said. He knew he could trust this figure, at the same time that another part of his mind was aware that it was a manifestation of Tinou. The intonation of the voice was the same, but it didn't matter. This one could be trusted. "What is your name?" Thel asked, to be sure.

"I am Naousa," the figure said, and reached forward in a confidential way to touch Thel lightly on the upper arm, a touch suasive and erotic. "This way."

He led Thel to a steep drop-off in the ridge, unlike anything Thel had seen before. Here the spine of the peninsula planed down and away in a smooth flat incline, as if an enormous blade had shaved off the mountain range, cutting at a hard angle down toward the beaches. Cliffs on the sides to the north and south remained, while the cut itself descended at nearly a forty-five degree angle. The exposed stone of the cut was as smooth as glass, and a black that somehow indicated it would be dark gray in daylight. Descending this slippery slope would be extremely difficult on foot, but Naousa reached deep into a cleft in the granite and pulled out two lightweight bobsleds, both a whitish color. The sleds' bottoms were smoother than the glassy rock slope, and had no runners or steering mechanism. "You lean in the direction you want to go," Naousa said. "The drop isn't entirely level left to right, so you have to steer a little to keep from going over the cliffs. Just follow me, and look out for bumps." And before Thel could nod he had jumped on his bobsled and was off.

Thel threw his sled down and sat on it, and quickly was sliding down the slope. Naousa was an obvious dot below, cutting big slalom curves down an invisible course. The cut slope was only a couple of hundred feet wide, though it broadened as they dropped lower. Bumps and curves invisible to the eye threw Thel left and right as he picked up speed, accelerating at what seemed an accelerating rate; he realized the only hope for survival was to follow Naousa's every move, even if it meant going as fast as Naousa and staying right on his tail. Naousa was flying down the slope, carving wide curves and crying out for joy— Thel could hear the shouts wafting back at him as another impossible turn by Naousa skirted the cliffs. It was thrilling to watch and Thel shouted himself, leaning hard left or right to follow Naousa's bold track, and despite the fact that it was like bobsledding on an open ice slope with cliffs on both sides, Thel began to enjoy himself—to enjoy the contemplation of Naousa's expertise, and his own reproduction of it, and the sheer noise of the sleds and the wind smashing his face and the tears streaming back over his ears and off the cliff edges into space, falling down like dewdrop stars into the original salt.

It was a long ride but did not take much time. At the bottom they sledded out onto the grass of a meadow and tumbled head over heels. Naousa picked up the sleds and tucked them behind a round boulder perched on the ridge. Down here the peninsula was different in character: the stone old and weathered and graying, the spine only fifty to a hundred feet above the noisy sea, and the beaches to both sides wide, with sand white as could be, even in the starless night. "The south side is the easiest walking," Naousa said, and headed down to the north side.

Thel shouted thanks, and dropped to the south side, and walked west toward the sunrise. The sun would be up soon, the sky to the west was blueing. The white sand underfoot was tightly packed; scuffing it made a squeaking sound, *squick, squick,* and the scuffed sand sprayed ahead of Thel's feet in brief blazes of phosphorous. The dunes behind the tidal stretch were neatly scalloped, and covered with dense short grass all blown flat, pointing west to the dawn. The dome of the sky was higher down here and fuzzier, the blues of dawn glowing pastels. Then as he walked stars began popping into sight overhead and he stepped knee deep into the beach, as if the sand were gel; he was sinking in it, the sky was the pink of cherry blossoms and he was in sand to his cheekbones, drowning in it.

11. Inside the Wave

The sun was hot on his cheek. There was too much light. He rolled on sand, shaded his eyes with a hand and cracked a lid: his brain pulsed painfully and the eyelash-blurred gold-on-white pattern meant nothing to him, then coalesced with a jolt that jerked his body up. The swimmer lay on the wide morning beach. Beyond her lay Garth and the three facewomen, leaves in their hair and long scratches on their arms and legs. Then he saw the shape of the mirror, in a bag tucked under the swimmer's outstretched arm. He was sitting and he almost rolled to her side, every muscle creaking as if carved of wood. He shook her arm, afraid to touch the bag holding the mirror.

She woke, and he asked her what had happened. She stared at him.

"I don't remember," he explained. "I mean, Tinou and the others pushed me through that," pointing at the mirror bag. "After that. . . ."

She spoke slowly. "The spine kings attacked and everything caught fire. The sorcerers left you on the plaza, and the mirror as well. We picked you up and carried you away, and took the mirror too. Then you woke and told us to follow you, and we did. We climbed out on the cliff face beside Oia to escape the sorcerers and the spine kings, and the next night we climbed to the spine and started west. You talked most of the time but we couldn't see who you talked to. Garth carried the mirror. The spine dropped into a forest and you ran all the way, and we chased you. Then it seemed you were never going to see us, and so Garth said we should push you back through the mirror. We did that and you fell through, unconscious—"

"You could just push me through?"

"No, it wouldn't work at first, it was hard as glass when I tried it, but Garth said it had to be at sunset, on the spine, with a kessel hawk hunting in the western sky. We waited three days until we saw one, and then it worked. But after we got you through you were asleep again. So we waited and then we fell asleep too. I'm hungry."

The others were stirring at the sound of their voices. They woke and the beach air was filled with the chatter of voices over the hiss of broken waves. As they shared their stories they walked to the sea without volition, drawn by their hunger. The peninsula had changed to something like what Thel had traversed in his time beyond the mirror: a low forested mound snaking through the sea, sandy moon bays alternating with chalky headlands. They walked to the next bay. The beach was a steep pebbly shingle that roared and grumbled at every wave's swift attack and retreat, and among the millions of shifting oval pebbles, which when wet looked like semiprecious stones, they found crabs, beach eels, scraps of seaweed that the facewomen declared edible, and one surprised-looking fish, tossed up by a wave and snatched by Garth. As they made their catch they wandered west, marking the sine curve of the hours with their passage until the sun was low. Knobs of old worn sandstone stood here and there like vertebrae out of the scrubby forest, and they climbed to one of these bony boulder knots collecting dead wood as they went, and in the sunset made a fire using Garth's firestone and knocker. Every scrap of the sea's provender tasted better than the last, the least scrap finer than a master chef's creation. Clouds came in from the south as if a roll of carpet had been kicked over them, and the sinking sun tinted the frilly undersurface a delicate yellow. Their fire blazed through the long dusk, and in the wind the whitecaps tossed, so that it felt as if they were on the deck of a ship.

Each day they foraged west, and spent the night on knolls. "We'll reach your folk soon?" Thel asked the facewomen.

"Perhaps."

They hurried on, hiking on the beaches over wet round stones that clacked together all the day long. In the evenings around the fire they pulled the mirror from its bag and contemplated it cautiously. Each of them saw different things in it, and they couldn't agree on its color. Salmon, gold, copper, lapis; such divergence of perception was frightening, and they snapped at each other and put it away, and slept uneasily.

One dawn Thel woke. The night before the mirror had been left face up on a rock, and he circled his hand over it, looking down at eyes, hair, red stones, years. The swimmer inched over the sandstone and lay prone beside him, their heads together as they peered down into it, as if looking down a well. "What is it?" Thel said.

"It shows the truth," the swimmer said, then smiled. "Or maybe it just makes things pretty."

They tilted it so it reflected their two faces.

"Hey!" Thel exclaimed. "That's me."

It was the face he knew from a billion beard burns: narrow jaw, round forehead, long nose, wide mouth. He would have looked a long time but the reflection of the swimmer stole his gaze; it was her face, but subtly transformed, the harsh strong lines emphasized and given a pattern, a human face before anything else, but so purely human that it was, he thought happily, that of a god.

They broke their gazes at the same time and looked at each other; grinning like children who have gotten away with something forbidden, they let the mirror drop and rolled together. Blood surged through Thel as they kissed and made love, he sank into her as if into a wave, riding inside the wave on an endless rise, pulled along as when bodysurfing. Touch was everything then, her skin, the stone under his knees and elbows; but once he looked up and saw the mirror beyond her head and filled with joy he waved a hand over it: gold light flashed up into the chill salt predawn air.

12. The Facewomen

After that Thel carried the mirror bag himself. Ahead, where the horizon washed over the black mark of the spit, a short line of bonfires sparked in the late twilight skies. The three facewomen stood and watched intently. "They are our signal beacons," one said, and after a while added, "They say we are being pursued."

So they began to hike all through the long days, and in the dawns and dusks, and each night the three facewomen talked among themselves, and then one night their eyefaces talked among themselves, in high-pitched voices; and yet they said to the other three travelers only, "We are being pursued."

Wearily they hiked on, spurred by this pronouncement, and then one day in the late morning they came to a deep stone-ringed firepit. The leader of the facewomen touched one of the stones. "We are home," her eyeface said. She and her two companions led the way thereafter, across sunken meadows spotted with vernal ponds and patches of bright wildflowers.

These meadows, strung like green stones on a necklace, grew larger and larger until they came on one that was broad and flat, and ringed by a split log fence and a number of low twisty pines. At the far side of the fenced-in enclosure clustered a herd of small quick dark horses, flowing along the fence like a single organism. In the trees behind the fence stood hexagonal buildings with wood walls and hide roofs.

The three facewomen ran to one of the huts and burst into it, and emerged with a small gang of other facewomen clinging to them and shouting. When they had calmed down, Thel, the swimmer and Garth were welcomed with a fluid formality, recursive smiles of welcome shrinking away into the infinity of the facewomen's right eyes. It seemed to Thel that all the inhabitants of the meadow were women, but he noticed children among them, and saw that they tended to clump in groups of three; Garth confirmed that these were reproductive units.

Their threesome took them to what appeared to be the oldest threesome, village elders who greeted them and thanked them for rescuing their granddaughters. "When the spine kings arrive you must not be here," one said. "But we will provide you with horses to speed you on your way west, in thanks for helping our daughters. And you may spend two nights here resting."

They slept in a storage hut on piles of woven blankets, feeling so luxurious that they could scarcely get comfortable. The next day they were taken to the big meadow pasture's corral, and introduced to three of the small horses. Their hair was the chestnut red of certain fir trees Thel had seen back on the high spine, and their manes, long and rough, felt exactly like handfuls of the trees' hairy fibrous bark: indeed, looking closely at it, he couldn't see any difference. He laughed. Then the small herd in the enclosure bolted and ran around the inside of the fence, all in a mass, their manes and long russet hair flowing behind them as if they were underwater, and he laughed again. "A horse is a fish made of trees," he told the startled swimmer, and leaped on his animal and rode head pressed into the stiff rough red mane, feeling the sea wind course over him as it had during his wild ride on the other side of the mirror. Jerking the animal's head to one side or another influenced its direction, and pulling back on the mane slowed it, as kicking it spurred it on. The corral mistress said as he leaped off, "Ride these until you come to the brough—they can take you no further. Set them free and they will return to us. They know to hide from the spine kings."

"Thanks for your help," Thel said.

One of the smallest visible eyefaces grinned. "With what you are carrying," it said in a small voice, "we want you as far away as possible when the spine kings arrive."

"Ah."

13. No Distinctions

The following morning Thel, Garth, and the swimmer woke with the dawn, and the facewomen led them to their horses and waved farewell as they rode off. The horses were exuberant with running, and galloped over the dunes waving their heads from side to side like blind things, eating the air and snapping at their riders if they were interfered with. So they hung on and rode. Thick white thunderheads grew over the water to the south, and the colors of everything in the long morning light were richer than they remembered them being, the water a dark glassy blue outside jade shallows, the foam on the breakers as white as the clouds, the dune grass subtle khaki, the red barky hair of their horses an irresistible magnet for the eye. The horses ran along the beach until midday, then browsed on the sparse dune grass. In the midafternoon they rode again. They traveled so much faster than they could have on foot that it was hard to grasp: they were already far from the facewomen's meadow, and the horses ran on tirelessly through the long glarey stretches of late afternoon, until at sunset they trotted to a halt and stood in a wind-protected dip between two dunes, browsing easily through the mauve dusk.

They rode like that for days. Each day the peninsula became lower, narrower, more stripped of life. The thick mats of dune grass reduced to occasional patches, the tufts of grass as sparse as the hair on a balding man. Each tuft had been blown in every direction by the winds, creating a perfect circle of smoothed hard sand around it, deepest at the outer edge; the dunes became geometrical worksheets, sine waves covered with circles. One sunset walking in this deeply patterned sand Thel looked down at a tuft of grass and the perfect circle around it, and thought, That is your life: a stalk of living stuff blown in every direction, leaving a brief pattern in sand.

After many days of travel on horseback they saw in the distance ahead a small knob in the peninsula. Days passed and it seemed they would reach the knob the following afternoon for several days running, but it was bigger than they had first thought, and kept receding.

Finally it loomed up, several hundred feet tall, like a sandstone lighthouse. They skirted it on the wide southern beach, and on the other side discovered a most extraordinary thing: the beach stretched out into the blue sea, and got thinner and lower, until it sank under the water. "It's the end!" Thel cried.

"No no," Garth said. "It's the water gate. I've heard stories about it. Look out there, see that smudge? It's the other cape, where the peninsula proper begins again. In between is a tidal bar. This is the lowest part of the spine, nothing more. At low tide a strip of sand will emerge as fine as any road, and stay above the waves for half the day."

It proved to be true. As the afternoon progressed the beach extended farther into the water, which was racing from north to south in a strong current, breaking whitely in a straight line that divided the sea. This stretch of white foam boiled furiously in a line to the horizon and the distant smudge of the farther cape. Then in a matter of moments, it seemed, the whitewater divided and fell away into two sets of waves rolling in from right and left, leaving a strip of wet gray sand and wet brown rock standing between them. The breakers tumbled in over rocky shallows on both sides, but the bar stood clear of them. And the spine trail extended even here; squarish blocks of water-holed rock had been laid in a path over the bar, making a causeway a foot or two higher than the bar itself. "The horses can't cross that," Garth said. "The rock would tear up their hooves."

"But surely it's more than one tide's walk across?" the swimmer said.

Garth nodded. "Still we must send the horses back, as we said we would." And he kicked and shouted at the horses, threw rocks at them until they cantered off, and circled nervously; then regarded each other and broke for home, flowing down the beach like a school of red fish darting through the sea.

Something moved on the side of the knob and they jumped, turned to look. It was a man the same color as the sandstone, his skin the same grainy dark brown.

As he approached they saw he was naked, and that his eyes, his hair, everything was the brown of the rock. In his eyes the color seemed darker, the way the rock did when it was wet.

He stopped before them and said, "I am Birsay the guide. It is more than one tide's walk to cross the brough, as you noted. This is how we do it; there is a rise near the halfway point, and we run to that in one low tide, on a path that I have built. It is just possible, though you get your legs wet. There on the rise I have left several large holed rocks. We tie ropes I have made to those anchors, and as the water rises we rise on it, floated by slings I have made of kelp bladders and wood. The current pushes us out, usually to the south, but we are tied by the ropes to the anchor rocks, and when the tide ebbs, we float down to a landing, and complete the crossing of the brough to the other cape."

"Why have you made these things?" Thel asked. "Why do you do this?"

The sandstone-colored man shrugged. "The peninsula extends around the world, and there is no land but it. And this is the only place in its circumference where the sea has chewed the peninsula down almost to its level. And naturally the peninsula must be passable. Traders come through, and circumnavigators on pilgrimages—believers of more religious persuasions than I'd care to recall. It is simply the natural order of things. The land itself calls forth a guide to sustain that order, and I am the forty-ninth reincarnation of that guide, Birsay."

He led them to a tall cave entrance in the side of the knob, down stone steps to a dry sand floor. Against one wall were circles of coiled rope, made of some sort of animal hair or plantlike fiber—impossible in this world to be sure which, it occurred to Thel as he examined it. It was thick in the hand, and would certainly hold against any current. The floats Birsay had mentioned were there too, made of the big bulbs one saw at the base of kelp tubes, tied by flat cords to a wooden framework that held them under the arms, and around the chest and back. "You spend almost half a day suspended in the tide," Birsay said. "The water is warm, though by the end it doesn't feel so. The bath is good for the skin. Then the distance from the rise to the western cape is not as great as the distance from here to the rise."

The three travelers conferred by eye. Garth said, "When would you have us leave?"

"We've wasted too much of this ebb. And they are getting longer every day now, for twenty more days. The next one will begin in the dark before dawn."

"The next, then," Thel said, and the other two nodded their agreement.

They spent the night in the cave, around a small warm driftwood fire, the twisted shapes of the wood burning in bright flames tinged with blue, green, salmon. What little smoke there was rose through a blowhole in the roof of the cave. The guide fed them broiled conch, seasoned with wild onions and a gingery seaweed.

Birsay had a place for everything, and he moved neatly and quickly around the fire, catching its light just as the cave walls did, so that sometimes it was hard to see him. He brought out a tray of black loam for Garth to stick his feet into after the regular meal was done, and with a blush and a grateful look, Garth silently buried his feet in the dirt.

"Do you guide all travelers that appear here?" Thel asked.

"I do."

"You make no distinctions?"

"What do you mean?"

"Those that follow us are murderers, intent on our lives."

"Is that so?" The wet pebble eyes regarded him with interest. "Well, I wish you all speed. I make no distinctions of that kind, no. Good, evil, right, wrong—they are personal matters, shifting from one to the next. These murderers may regard themselves as righteous folk, and you as great criminals perhaps, thieves of something they cherish, perhaps, who knows?" Though he glanced at Thel's mirror bag as if he did know. "How am I to judge? By your stories? By the looks on your faces?" He dismissed the idea with a flip of the hand. "My task is to lead travelers across the low point in the world road. Their purposes, their identity—none of my concern. One winter I led death himself across the brough, you can still see his footprints in the rock where a wave splashed him and he got angry. . . ." And as the firelight played over his face he told them stories of travelers who had passed, men and women and creatures it sometimes took him the burning of a branch to describe. One such had had the legs and waist of a man, his chest then rising up into the rounded and feathered body of a giant eagle. This creature had spoken to him in grim croaks, and after a while Birsay had guessed the truth; it walked across the brough because it had had its wing muscles clipped, so that it could no longer fly. The guide laughed at Thel: "How judge that, eh? How judge that?"

14. Crossing the Bar

In the middle of the night Birsay crouched by their warm sand beds and roused them. "The brough comes clear soon." They rose and ate more conch, and at Birsay's instruction drank from a jug of fresh water until their stomachs were heavy and cold.

The star flood still lit the beach as they walked onto the wet sand. Birsay watched each wave closely, and as one ran up the sand he pointed. "Last high wave," he said. "From now on they ebb."

Then more and more of the beach was revealed as each wave sluiced back and hopped over the nonexistent rail where the water regrouped and turned again. A point emerged, wet tan sand with a crosshatched stippling of black. Then the waves fell back to left and right as they had the afternoon before, and the line of boiling white water appeared. The bar emerged, at first just as an extension of their point of sand, receding away from them at a walking pace: then, in the blue of dawn, the water simply ran away from them to right and left, and they walked on a sandbar that extended all the way to the horizon.

Struck silent at the uncanny sight, the three travelers strode quickly after Birsay, their ropes coiled and hung over their shoulders, their floats hanging on straps tied over their own backpacks and bags. The sun rose and cast long faint shadows ahead of them. The seas rolled up flat wet sand to right and left, the northern and southern seas separated only by their spit of wet sand.

They walked through patches crunchy with seashells, or squishy with living anemones. It was a blue day, the air clear as glass and the sea and sky darker and lighter shades of the same full blue. The sand and Birsay were a color composed of tan and black sand, mixed thoroughly. A handful of it washed thin by water revealed clear grains, smaller white and brown grains, and tiny floating black flecks.

Then the sand began to grow thin over bedrock of the same color, which broke through as if it were a little model of the spine, here worn to ankle-high knobs and nubs, split by the sea down its grain of stratification, running across the bar from sea to sea. Eventually they walked on bare rock, sharp ribs of brown that ran out under the white waves, which grumbled toward them to nothing in hundreds of parallel grooves. Eventually the shallow faults turned the brough into a stretch of pitted knife edges, set across their way. Walking over these edges would have devastated first sandals and then feet, but Birsay or his predecessors had filled a rough narrow path through the faults with blocks of loose stones—an old path, it seemed, for the blocks were worn in their settings, and in places had been washed away.

They hurried over this low causeway, until when they looked behind they could see no sign of Birsay's knob, or the low peninsula beyond it; ahead they saw no sign of the knob at the halfway point, nor the farther cape. The brough extended all the way to the horizon in both directions, a horizon nearly at eye level, so that it seemed they crossed the bottom of a flattish bowl of ocean, which would sooner or later rush in on them. It was a strange sight.

In late mid-afternoon they came to Birsay's knob, first seen as a bulge in the bar, a widening of the white water to the sides. "We've made good time," Birsay said, "but it's always a close thing. By sunset we'll be floating."

Once on the knob it seemed not much different from the rest of the brough: slightly wider, minutely taller, pocked and runneled like all the rest of the rock they had traversed. In the largest potholes were big blocks of rock that had had holes chiseled through them, and following Birsay's instructions they tied the ends of their ropes through these holes. Birsay chose the anchor rocks very carefully, after observing the surging mush and the wind, and his charges' bodies; he spread them out at intervals along the bar, Thel, Birsay, Garth, the swimmer. Their few possessions they placed in other potholes, with stones placed over them.

They sat on the damp rock, and waited. The tide began to come in.

It was impossible not to be frightened at the sight. Each broken wave rushed at them, at first as thick as the wave had been high, and boiling over the reef below; it thinned as it made its furious rush, until it was bubbling water trickling up the furrows in the rock, and then receding. But each final gurgle was closer than the last.

"Usually the south reaches us first," Birsay said, "because that's where the prevailing winds come from. But today—" he frowned, sniffing— "the wind is from the east. And the north side is closing faster." He turned and turned again on the knob's highest point, sniffing. "It may be windy tonight."

Then, in the surge of just a few waves, the four of them were sitting on a tiny rock island in a sea of boiling white water, waves from the two seas running together and slapping up into the air, in lines of wind-tossed spray. Then a big wave from the north ran up the rock and right over their feet and backs. Quicker than Thel would have believed possible, every wave rolled over the rock and their lower legs. They stood around Birsay on the peak, and then waves from the south sea piled in as well, and up and down the brough to east and west they could see long sheets of white water squirting up into the air, underneath them a chaos of wave and backwash, the sea white with foam, millions of bubbles hissing out their lives, sending a fine rain into the air and creating a tremendous loud roar, a roar made of glugs and hisses that individually would scarcely be heard across a room.

When the water got waist high they were shoved hard this way and that, and Birsay told them in a loud voice to hang on—that this was the only tricky part—and that they should soon cast off and get away from the knob, trusting to their floats and anchors. When the waves were chest high they were forced to take his advice, and they swam off after him to the south, floating easily on their miniature rafts and spreading out as they were pushed straight out from their anchors.

As the tide rose the water grew calmer, until the only signs of the brough were long snaking lines of crusty foam floating away to the south, and an occasional brief mushy break at the top of the largest waves as they crossed the bar. The waves, and the current that pushed them, were from the northwest. So they floated to the southeast of the knob, connected to it like kites flying in the wind of the tidal current. If they rested they were some thirty feet from each other, and they were about two hundred feet from the submerged knob, so that Thel and the swimmer, on the outsides, could easily paddle over to talk to the middle two. Garth's shoulder tree looked odd indeed sticking up out of the water, like the last remnant of a deluged land. Garth's face was sputtering and apprehensive beside it; he couldn't swim and had to trust his float, clearly a difficult act of faith.

It was a strange sunset. Now the horizon was closer and higher than ever, the dome of the sky taller: all as blue as they had been at dawn. The sun dropped through the air yellow as a daisy and sunk without fanfare, turning green at the end as if the last rays had shone through water. During the long dusk a line of puffy white clouds appeared to the northwest, so tall they redefined the height of the sky. These clouds eventually took on copper and iron hues, and cast their color over everything else, so that the sea took on a coppery sheen, and the air was dark and metallic. Birsay watched this development nervously, and when the wind shifted and picked up suddenly, he swam to Thel's side and said, "It may be a cold night. The northerlies are hard."

Thel swallowed salt and nodded. Already the water felt warmer than the air, so that his head was cold, and it was warming to duck it into the brine. Birsay said the southern current was warmer still; Thel was content with the northern one, which felt just a touch below body temperature. But the northwest wind was cold, and the swells rolling by began to steam a little. In the last light of the dusk they saw the line of tall clouds approaching, blocking out the stars that were just popping into salt-blurred existence. The travelers rose and fell on dark swells that steamed whitely. They rose and fell, rose and fell.

The wind strengthened and waves began to break on the bar, emerging from the dark several hundred feet away from them, on the northern shallows. There low dark surges in the sea's surface reared up and toppled over in a white roar, water shattered and tumbling chaotically, in a line as far as they could see. The broken waves rolled over the bar in a low continuous thunder, but as the water deepened again each wave would reconstitute itself out of its own mush, the whitewater shrinking back up the side of the swell until it was only a whitecap; and then it was only a groundswell again, on which they rose and fell, rose and fell, crest to trough and back again.

But the wind got stronger, and the waves bigger. A groundswell breaks when the depth of water below it is equal to the height of the swell, trough to crest; now the swells were as high as the water beneath their feet, and they were at the ends of their ropes, they couldn't get any farther out onto the south sea. The wind picked up again, and now each time they rose on a swell there was broken water at the crest, so that they had to plunge under it and hold their breath until their floats pulled through the wave and out into the air again.

It was raining, Thel noticed once when he came up, a cold rain that roiled the ocean surface and threw up more steam. Now the wind howled, and the waves became big rolling walls of broken white mush, wild and powerful. It was all Thel could do to hold his breath as he was thrashed up and down under these broken waves; he held his float to him, waited grimly each time for it to pull him back up into the roaring black night. When it did he gasped in huge breaths, and looked to his right where the others were, but could see little through the spray. Then another wave would lift him and he would duck under the whitewater, endure its tumbling, come up again. Efforts to swim sideways to Birsay were useless, and getting to Garth and the swimmer unthinkable: and yet she was only ninety feet away.

He could only concentrate on getting under each wave with a full breath, and on staying upright in his float. The night fell into an endless pattern of rising, ducking under whitewater, holding on with lungs bursting, popping back out into the shrieking wind, resting against the float's restraint. Then again. And again. It went on until at one point he got so tired it seemed he couldn't go on, and he considered cutting the rope and floating off to the south on the groundswell. But then a sort of second wind came to him, a stubborness suffusing every cell of his muscles and lungs, and he worked to make each forced plunge as streamlined and efficient as he could, grimly trying to relax and be at ease as the broken water threw him about, as loose as a rag on a clothesline in a stiff wind. He fell into a rhythm. Nothing marked the passing of time, it seemed he had been breathing in a pattern of submergence in the sea for years. The water began to feel cool, then cold. His head and arms were frigid in the wind's rip. Then as he floated, waiting for the next rise, lightning forked down to his left. By the fey snap of light he glimpsed dots on the water, heads and floats—and then he was under again. The lightning struck again when he was underwater, he saw the flash and opened his closed eyes and saw a field of bubbles, white in green—then black. Three or four more times lightning struck, but always when he was submerged. He wondered if they would be electrocuted.

Then one wave thumped him down onto rock. The air burst from his lungs and he nearly blacked out before resurfacing. It was still dark night up there, the storm raging, rain coming down harder than ever: he could get a refreshing swallow of fresh water merely by turning his open mouth to the northwest. Submerged again, he kept his feet down and hit the rock bottom more gently. But it got harder as the tide ebbed, and the broken waves swept across the brough more wildly; often they knocked him down against the bottom and thumped him against it repeatedly, until he ached with the battering, and it seemed that after all the night's labors he might be killed by his landing.

Eventually he stood chest high in the waves' troughs, then waist high;

but it was too much work to stand, and too cold. He crouched down in the water and let the float and rope hold him, peering through the blackness for the next onrushing wall of whitewater.

Finally the broken waves themselves were low enough that he could float over them, his head clear; and in the troughs the whitewater only sluiced over his knees. He hauled himself up the rope toward the knob, where it was shallower still; he could sit, and turn his back to the waves and the wind. Relaxing his stomach muscles made him retch. When he had gathered some strength he hauled himself up onto the knob, and found the other anchors, and slogged down the length of Garth's rope; out in the murk he could see Garth bobbing.

But it was only his float. "No," Thel said. Rather than return to the knob he just swung on his rope sideways, and bumped into Birsay unexpectedly; but Birsay hung in his float, head back, mouth and eyes wide open to the waves. He had drowned. Stomach spasming, Thel swung back the other way, stepping on sharp rock. No sign of the swimmer. Back, forth, up, back; nothing. He had to walk back to the knob and find her anchor. The rope hung loose in the water, trailing out to sea, and he hauled it in feeling like Death the Fisherman, afraid and sick at heart. Its end came to him, frayed. In the first predawn blue he peered at the ends of the fibers; it looked as if she had chewed through the rope, bitten her way free. The swimmer. He kneeled on the rock, collapsing around his cramped stomach. The swimmer. She had freed herself but kept the float, smart woman. Perhaps she had swum over and pulled Garth from his float, yes. Took them both off the bar, off to where the groundswell would pose no challenge to her swimming powers. Yes. She would come back. Or else swim to the cape in the west.

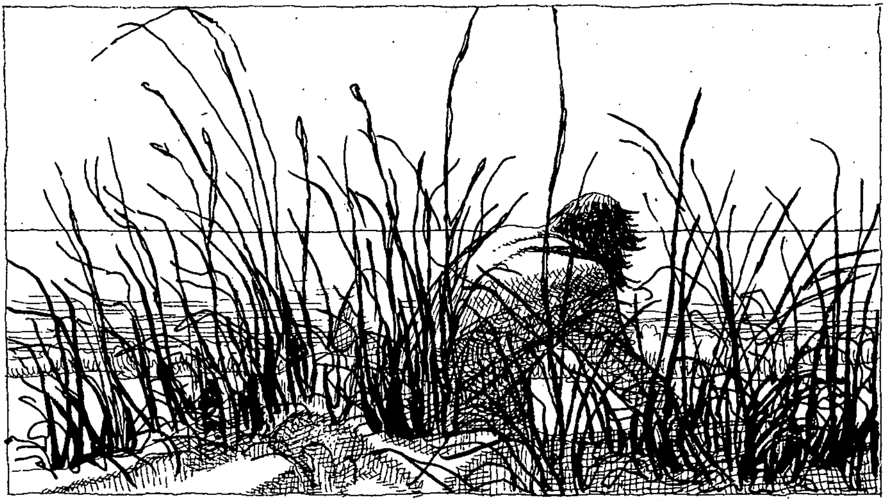
When dawn illuminated the seascape the tide had ebbed and the brough had returned, thought it was often overrun by the storm surf. Everything today was green, the sea a light jade, the clouds a heavy dark gray tinged with green, the bar brown, but greenish as if with algae.

Thel untied the float from his chest and tossed it aside. Angrily he kicked Birsay's anchor, left him bobbing in the waves. He put his bags over his shoulder, the mirror like a heavy plate in its wet sack. He took off along the bar, squish, squish.

It was hard to walk. Often he got off Birsay's path and fell in knee-deep transverse crevices, cracking his shins so hard that the world itself burst with pain, as it had when he was shoved through the mirror. The wind keened across the brough, in his ear and cold. It rained intermittently and clouds rushed overhead like the horses of the facewomen. Several times he heard the swimmer and Garth calling to him from the surf to his left, but he never saw them. The current in the southern sea was running swiftly toward the cape to the west, which now appeared as a dark hill in the clouds. A good sign, it would help them along. He drank sea water, he was so thirsty; he drank the blood from his shins for food, cupping it in a palm and getting a good mouthful after every fall. Its taste reminded him of Garth's fruit. Blindly he kicked on, and then the brough was sand. He ate some of it. The mirror was heavy on his back, he wanted to toss it aside but didn't.

He lay on the cape beach, in wet sand. Sand crabs hopped around him, tried to eat him and he ate them in return. Along the southern side of the cape, that was where they would land. A beach stream, fresh water cutting through the shingle. He lay in it and drank. When he woke again he was stronger, and could bury himself in the sand and sleep properly. The next day he found abalone studding a beach reef like geodes, and he broke them with rocks and ate the muscles after pounding them tender. That and the beach stream infused him with strength, and he began walking the cape's broad southern beach, under the steep green prow of the reemerging peninsula. The beach was studded with pools of water blue as the sky, and with driftwood logs from what had been immense trees, and with shell fragments that were sometimes big enough to sit in. All kinds of debris, on fine tawny sand, loose underfoot so that he often stumbled, and sometimes fell.

All kinds of debris: and yet when he came across one piece of driftwood, he knew it instantly. It was the remains of a shrub, stripped of leaves and bark—a thin trunk dividing into thinner branches, their broken ends rounded and smooth as if rolled in the waves for years. Just a sand-colored piece of driftwood, a splay of branches like a hand reaching out. He sat on the sand and wept.



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15. Submergence

He wandered the beaches on the southern side of the cape, and during each low tide ventured back out on the brough, looking for signs of the swimmer. In the evenings he grubbed on a beach of oval flat stones for crabs, and cracked more abalone, and felt a traitor to Garth and the swimmer every time he swallowed. He hated his hunger then, the way it drove him, the way he was its slave. The days were so long. During one he sat in the sand at the tip of the cape, on the edge of the prow that rose out of the sea to a grassy peak some five hundred feet above; and each part of that day passed like a year of grieving.

The next day he climbed the grassy peak. When he reached the top he could see far over the brough, a dark swath in the sea studded with whitecaps. It was an overcast day, the sun a white smeary blob and the sky like the inside of an abalone shell, arched over a sea of lead. The brough seemed to disappear out at the horizon, with no sign of the peninsula on the other side, as if the peninsula were sinking as he passed, sinking and disappearing forever, so that even if he walked around the world he would only someday come to a final cape, with the empty sea beyond and the land he stood on sinking.

16. A Face

As blank and bleached as a fragment of driftwood, he sat and let waves break on his head. He drank the salty tide until he could drink no more, threw it up, crawled to the beach stream to drink. One afternoon it occurred to him that the currents could have shifted, she could have come ashore on the north beaches, or been swept by currents far down the peninsula to the west, past him. Those small white teeth chewing away at the rope—surely such pure will have lived! Surely the will to survive had something to do with survival!

Next morning he walked west on the spine, investigating every cove beach tucked out of the view of the crest trail. Days passed like that, he no longer remembered much of the night of the storm, it was too much like the memory of a dream, vague, incoherent, illuminated in flashes, intensely disturbing. We forget dreams, he thought, because they are too vivid to face.

He sometimes had trouble remembering what had happened to him on the peninsula before the storm; once he couldn't recall what he was looking for, it was just something he did, climb up and down rocks step after step, looking closely at the margin of sea and shore, searching for patterns in the sand. Clouds rolled overhead, west to east in their own frilly groundswell, wave after wave of fronts, the masses of warm air wedging under the cold air and then rising like bubbles up through that drafty emptiness, clouds burgeoning into existence as the warm air expressed its watery milk.

For a week the sunsets were purest pink. Why in perfectly clear air some sunsets were pink, others bronze, others purple: he pondered that through many dusks, tending fires of driftwood started with a lens of clear glass he had found beachcombing. Through the long days he hiked westward and westward, roving from shore to shore. It was a task, a filling of the hours, a compulsion, a destiny. Kicking the rocks with the toe of his boot he heard chants come from his own mouth, wordless grunts, howls of pain, broken phrases: "And that. And that. And that. And that. And. . . ."

One day he came upon the grass-covered walls of an old hill fort. Around the old grassy mounds were a cluster of driftwood crofts, their roofs made of sod. The people he found in these buildings were tiny, thin, and brown.

At their bidding he entered the largest croft and sat and ate with them, around the smoke of a peat fire. The east wall had two small windows, and shafts of sunlight shone motty through the reek. The closeness and the warmth induced a great lassitude in him, and for a long hour he thought he might lie there and never get up again. The crofters appeared to forget him, and went about their tasks as if he weren't there.

And then, at the window: a face.

It disappeared; he leaped up, and crashed out the door, and ran straight into her. They fell together as they had on the night beach. The swimmer.

"Ah," he said. "Ah, God—"

She laughed. Face drawn, body thin— "It's you!" she cried, and grabbed his shoulders.

He embraced her, held that strong hard body against him, then pushed her back to look at her. Still her. It made him weep and laugh at once in the same hot convulsion of his face; it was her, no doubt of it, in his arms as real as his living hand.

"I thought you were dead," he whispered.

"And I you." Her voice. "I thought you had drowned."

He nodded, speechless. "Garth did. Garth and the guide."

She pursed her lips. "That was a bad storm."

Thel looked around. The crofters had emerged to find out what the commotion was about. The swimmer saw them and laughed. "Have you still got the mirror?" she said.

"Yes," said Thel. He found he was shaking.

"Then let's be on our way. The spine kings may still be following, and we don't want to get these people in trouble."

"No." Thel went inside the croft and got his bag. Outside again the swimmer took his hand and led him out of the hill fort, west and up a tumbled boulderslope to the crest of the spine. By then it was late in the day, the light pool of the sea split by the dark peninsula, and the sky darkly luminous and semi-transparent, revealing for an instant the world behind the sky; still astounded by her presence, nearly floating with joy, Thel started to run. He pulled her into her clumsy swimmer's gait and they ran along the spine trail.

17. Exfoliation

It was like being born again. They hiked through the long days napping only briefly at midday, and wandered the long dusks hunting for food on the beaches, swimming and then sleeping in sand. In the midnights Thel rose and walked about looking at stars till he chilled, then returned to the swimmer and her blanket.

One night when he returned to the swimmer, lying against her back with an arm over her and feeling her bottom shift back into his belly, he noticed the wind pouring over them. They were sleeping on the very edge of a beach cliff, just for the fun of the views at sunset and dawn, tucked into a hollow scooped at the cliff's edge, and wind was tearing down and out to sea; but as he had walked around the central plateau of the peninsula the night had been perfectly still, he had noticed it particularly. He got up and walked back out onto the hills, and again it was still; and at the cliff's edge, windy. He roused the swimmer and moved them inland a bit for the second half of the night. "The weight of the air keeps me awake," he told her. "It's falling over the edge."

He found out what had happened to her in the time since the storm on the brough, but only in snatches, in response to his questions. She had bitten her way free of the rope, as he had guessed. She had swum for a long time, she couldn't say how long, but from the way she spoke of it (or didn't), he thought it might have been very long indeed; days, certainly. She had landed on the southern side, and, assuming they had all survived and made it to the cape, she had walked back to it and searched for them, but found nothing. She waited there for a long time, regaining her strength and assuming she would see Birsay, escorting other travelers across; but no one ever appeared, and so finally she started west again. Groups traveling east to west passed her, and she had hidden from them, afraid that they might be the spine kings or the sorcerers. And then one day she had come on the crofts around the hill fort, and looked in the window.

"We may have been wandering on the opposite sides of that cape at around the same time," Thel said. "And even along the peninsula." It was painful to think that they might have met much sooner simply by making an arbitrary change of direction.

"We're lucky we ever met again at all," she said. "It's a big world."

"But narrow." The thought of never meeting her again made him shiver. "As long as we both continued westward. . . ."

"We were lucky. We've always been lucky."

One night after lying down and talking for a while they rolled together and kissed, then mated, and at first he was frightened because it was such a vital connection, so *important* to him. But that was the price of such a bond. Joy itself had an element of fear, he thought, the fear of loss; that was what it meant to live in time. He was lucky to have a reason for such fear.

As they continued westward the peninsula rose in elevation again, the backbone of pure granite breaking up out of the sea and sand and climbing like the edge of some enormous battered scimitar. They walked without urgency, merely to walk, to create a good space between themselves and all that lay behind, and each day was spent watching where each step went, climbing the shattered staircase of stone, becoming intimate with the local granite, an ever-modulating mixture of feldspars pink or orange or yellow, big clear grains of quartz, flecks of black hornblende. These three types of rock, jumbled and melded, forming the hard cracked fin of granite lifting out of the sea: it was hard for Thel not to be mesmerized by such a thing, to imagine it amelt and flowing like candlewax under the immense pressures inside the earth.

They came to a long straight stretch of the spine, where the feldspar was white and the hornblende just freckled the mix, making it the whitest granite possible. Here the southern side of the spine became a perfectly vertical drop to the sea, while the northern flank offered a gentle rocky slope to a wide white beach. The trail stayed well away from the southern cliff, but at midday or dusk they sometimes walked up to the edge to take a look down, and one evening in a dulcet sunset they looked over the edge and found that the whole cliff was a single gigantic overhang, as if the spine had been tipped to the south. They looked straight down at the sea, and could see nothing of the upper two-thirds of the cliff under them.

Quickly they stepped back, then lay flat and crawled forward, to stick their heads over the edge and have another look. The two or three thousand feet of the cliff looked like the curved inner wall of a shallow cave; they lay on an immense overhang. Thel could feel his stomach trying to reach through his skin and clamp onto the rock, like an abalone muscle; the drop was such that he and the swimmer laughed, in an instinctive attempt to ward off the fear of it. Thel crawled back and grabbed a loose rock that was as heavy as he cared to play with in that area, and shoved it over the edge. They watched it fall until it was a speck that disappeared, but the splash was bigger, a brief burst of white in the flat plate of blue, a *long* distance offshore from the cliff's bottom. They exclaimed at the sight, and did it again, and then they lay there until the light was almost gone, hypnotized by the lascivious false sense of danger, the sublimity. Mid-dusk a flock of seabirds rose up from the water in spiraling gyres, big white birds like cormorants that apparently nested in cracks or arches in the exfoliated cliff under them, out of their sight—for the birds rose and rose, tilting together on updrafts, flapping and banking, growing bigger, shifting this way and that like bubbles rising in water.

18. Nautilus Universe

A week or so later the spine twisted south and dropped again, fanning out into a big broken rockfield, granite hills and knobs faulted with long grabens that had become skinny ponds or rectangular pools, or thin meadows that cut the rock from beach to beach. Up and down they walked over this terrain, sometimes on the trail which continued to snake its way along the path of least action, or else rambling over the rock, down into a meadow, up edges, over the rock, down into another grassy swale. It was good land, dotted with trees that clung to the steep jumbles of rock and soil that walled the meadows: foxtail pines, no taller than the two travelers but with thick riven trunks, and bare dead branches spiking out of them in every direction. Steep bluffs stood over the white bay beaches, and many of the bluff tops were rimmed by a tuck of these foxtails, growing crabbed and horizontal in the winds.

They crossed this land for many days, and one afternoon when they were foraging on the southern beach for food, they came upon a shallow bay, a perfect arc of a circle. The bluffs backing the bay were cut by sandy ravines, and between bluff and beach there was a crescent of dunes covered with olive and silver grass.

Scattered over the dunes in irregular rows were sea shells as big as houses. They resembled nautilus shells in which the smaller segments have been pulled a bit out to the side, but they stood about three or four times Thel's height. Their thick curved walls were colored in complex spiraling patterns of brown or deep purple trapezoids, which turned with the shape of the shells and grew smaller and smaller as they twisted around to an invisible center point, like the eyefaces of the facewomen.

Thel and the swimmer walked among these specimens in awe, observing how they gleamed in the late afternoon light, for each one appeared to have been polished as smooth as glass; and there were even, they saw, windows of some clear material replacing some of the brown and purple trapezoids, high in the curved sides.

They were just looking under the bottom edge of one shell when a short brown woman ducked out and regarded them suspiciously. "Who are you?" she demanded, touching the thick edge of her shell, looking as though she might bolt back under at any second. "What are you doing?"

"I am a swimmer," the swimmer said gently. "This is Thel. We are travelers from east of the brough. We seek nothing of you, and will leave if our presence makes you unhappy."

"No, no," the woman said. "Not necessary." As she spoke, others ducked out from their shell cottages, people small like the woman, and with leathery skin of brown or purplish cast. They were a nervous crowd, and as they shuffled about the two they moved away reflexively each time the swimmer gestured. But in the end they welcomed the two cordially enough, and invited them to eat with them, a varied meal of fish and seaweed bits, washed down by a sparkling liquor that made the two instantly drunk. The shell people offered them a shell of their own to spend the night in, and they agreed, dropping to hands and knees to get under the edge of one really large brown-flecked specimen.

Once inside it much resembled other beach cottages, or so the swimmer said. Cut plank floors had been set flat in each chamber, with plank staircases leading through holes cut from one chamber to the next. In each chamber driftwood furniture was covered with padded cloth made of fine seaweed hair, on which simple striped patterns had been printed with shell dyes. There were knick-knacks from the sea on the curved walls, and in an upper chamber a small bed was tucked under a window, across from a brick fireplace cut into the central wall. Each chamber had a window cut in its outer wall, the trapezoids filled with a clear fibrous material in the lower chambers where the windows were big, with mosaics of colored driftglass upstairs where the windows were small.

The swimmer observed it all with a delighted, little girl's smile, unlike any Thel had seen on her face. "It's just like my aunt and uncle's," she kept saying. "I used to love visiting them."

So they spent the night dry and warm, cuddled together in a narrow bed, and in the morning the shell people were out working the beach or the ravines or the meadows up above the bluffs. Their next door neighbor said to them, "If you will collect puka shells for us, you can stay in that house for as long as you care to. It hasn't been used in ages."

Collecting puka shells, they found, was a simple business, so simple that the shell people found it tedious; all of them but the children had more interesting or important things to do. Nevertheless they loved having the jewelry made from these shells. On the steep strand of the bay a vicious shorebreak sluiced the coarse blond sand back and forth, and as it did it ground up all the shells and coral bits and rocks that had found their way there, turning them into more of the coarse sand. Their next door neighbor showed the two travelers that among the shell fragments being washed up and down were many specimens of a small fat cone-shaped shell, all of which were being worn down until only the thick caps at the base of the cone remained, round and usually holed in the middle, at the centerpoint of the shell's whorl where it had been quite thin to begin with. So at a certain point in their disintegration these round flat holed pieces made perfect necklace beads, ready to be strung and worn; and a tiny percentage of them were a rich, deep blue, the color of the sky in mid-twilight. These blue pieces the shell folk treasured, and the most important members of the community wore many necklaces and bracelets and anklets of the blue buttons, and every shell person owned at least one big necklace of them.

The easiest method of finding them was simple, they were told. Stand in the shorebreak facing the shore, and as the waves sluiced back down over the coarse sand, one saw thousands of fragments of pastel shell color. Once every dozen or score of waves one saw a flash of the blue, a flash that somehow suggested it was not a jagged tiny fragment but a complete cap; and then with a quick pounce and some luck one could snatch it up, in a streaming handful of wet sand.

So Thel and the swimmer spent a day hunting puka shells, and at sunset they each had a small belt bag filled with the little blue circles. The shell folk were tremendously pleased, and fed them a feast of squid, shark, seaweed salad, and corn. And the day had passed pleasantly enough, and the swimmer remained delighted with their curved shell home; and so they decided to stay a while.

Soon enough they found that all was not peaceful among the shell folk. In fact they were all involved in ceaseless conflicts with one another, and alliances and social wars among them were quick, constant and volatile. The division among them between brown skin and purple seemed part of the conflict, but in some original sense that had been long since lost in subsequent permutations; now purple-skinned folk were likely to refer to themselves as brown, and vice versa, and they all wore clothing and shell jewelry in color codes, to indicate where their loyalties stood on any given day.

The important shifts in alliances and enemies were marked by the physical moving of their shell homes. The inhabitants, never more than one or two to a shell, would enlist friends and drag their home over the sand to a new neighborhood, sent on their way by bursts of violent cursing from their old neighbors, and leaving a swath through the sand to mark the dramatic event. The bay beach was crisscrossed by these trails, which wind and tide erased quickly enough; but there were always new tracks to replace the old. Psara, a lithe graceful man with purple skin that was the darkest in the village, explained to them that this was a fundamental part of their nature, and with a broad white smile he offered an explanation: "There are too few of us to reproduce properly if there is anything short of a total mixture. We cannot afford tribes or even families of any extent. Besides—" he grinned—"we are descended from crabs, and inclined to be solitary and feisty. An argument a day and you live forever, we say."

Thel and the swimmer found this a bit much, and one day they decided to take advantage of the mobility of residence, and they got Psara and some others to help them drag their shell out to the edge of the village, just inside the broad eastern point of the bay, beside a stream, behind a dune, and all by themselves. Their old neighbors shouted abuse at them as they left, but in a friendly tone, and they dropped by later to help return all the furniture to its proper place, and to trade for the previous day's catch of blue puka shells.

19. Pure Duration

And so they fell into the rhythm of the bay, into their own rhythm. They had their home, isolated from the battles and out under the eastern point's bluff. That whole stretch of beach they had to themselves, especially in the mornings; and the point was washed by the tides, and was an especially rich source of the blue shells.

Each strangely long day became a sort of eternity in itself. In the mornings the air was cool and clear and salty, the sea calm and the sun blazing over it. They stood calf-deep in the tumbling waves, facing the beach and the granite bluff behind, watching the sand mix wildly in the water, tiny shell fragments of pink and brown and yellow and purple and red tumbling over each other among the clear and white and tan grains of sand, all a tumble and a rush of wet brilliant color with the clear foam-flecked water pouring over it, and once in a while a flash of blue like a dark sky would reveal itself among the rest and they would dive, scoop up handfuls of sand, let it sift through fingers until the blue fragment was there to be plucked out and put in a bag. If they proved to have missed it, they groaned and started again. And it seemed it would be morning forever.

At midday they sat on the beach and ate something, and slept on the sand or talked, and it seemed the midday would last forever, a warm lazy eternal nap; and then in the afternoons they would walk the beach in search of food or the rare overlooked blue button poking out of the dry sand, or get in the surf and hunt again, and it seemed the afternoon would never end, the sun white and stationary in the broad western sky. Only at sunset did it seem time passed; slow, stately, the sun dropped and slowed as it dropped, it seemed, until it stood on the horizon chopped into orange slices by the layering of the atmosphere, and they had time to climb the bluffs and watch the mallow sea go indigo and the air become visible and the pared sun turn to a yellow sliver, then an emerald green dot, the green flash that ended the sunset. And then they were in the endless dusk, all its dark grainy colors filling with blackness as the eternal night came on. And this was just one day in an eternal round of unchanging days, until Thel felt that they lived forever every couple of weeks; and beyond that, in the unimaginable fullness of whole years, lay the touch of pure duration.

20. Castaway

Most of these endless days they spent alone, but sometimes one or more of the shell folk would drop by, especially the children, who were delighted to see them do something as childish as recover pukas. Their most frequent adult companion was Psara, who occasionally joined them in the surf, laughing at the sport but incredibly fluid and quick-eyed and quick-handed at it; he could collect more blue shells in a morning than Thel could in a couple of days. As he dove and spluttered in the shorebreak he regaled them with the village gossip, which was consistently lurid and melodramatic, a never-ending extravaganza of petty feuds and sordid sexual affairs.

He also invited them in to the rare festival nights, when everyone came out to a driftwood fire by the biggest stream and drank the clear liquor until they were all maudlin with drunken affection for one another, their feuds forgotten in the brilliant yellow light of festival reality. They would dance in rings around the fire, holding hands and crashing left and right, embracing their partners and declaring them wonderful browns or purples.

During one of these parties, late, when the fire was a pile of pulsing embers and the shell folk were comatose with liquor and neighborly feeling, Psara regarded the two beachcombers with his quick ironic smile, and slipped over to them and put a sensuous hand on the swimmer's broad shoulder, and on Thel's. "Would you like to hear a story?"

The two nodded easily.

"Paros," Psara said loudly, and the oldest person there jerked upright, peered around sleepily. "Tell us the story of the castaways, Paros!" and several children said "Yes please, please!"

Old Paros nodded and stood precariously. "This is a story from the world's beginning, when ocean never equaled gleamed in the dark, perfect and white and empty. Across her white body sailed a raft, not our ship of fools but an orderly and good society, the brown and the purple having little to do with each other but coexisting in peace." Some of the villagers laughed at that.

"But one day a brown man and a purple woman met at the mast, and talked, and later they did it again, and again, and when the browns and the purples bathed over the side they dove under the raft and swam together for a time; and they fell in love.

"Now both of them were married, and their partners were prominent in the societies of brown and purple. So when the two were finally discovered, all the browns and purples were outraged, and there were calls to drown the two lovers.

"But the raft sailed by an island in the white sea, the smallest speck of land—a rock, a tree, a shell and a stream. And the browns and purples decided to maroon the two lovers, and threw them overboard, and the two swam to the island. And as they swam, ocean never equaled seeped into their minds and took all memory of the raft away from them, so that they would not despair.

"And they landed on the island, and the raft sailed away and would never come back. The woman gave birth to many children, and the children quarreled and would have killed each other. So ocean never equaled made the island longer, so that there would be room for the children and grandchildren of the two lovers to live without mortal strife between them. But they fought and multiplied at such a rate that ocean never equaled had to stretch the island all the way around her, to give them room to chase each other endlessly; and the white sea turned blue with the blood and tears shed."

Silence. Paros sat down. Gray film fluttered on the dull coals of the fire. Thel felt as though he were falling; he had to clasp the swimmer's arm to steady himself, even though they were sitting.

Later as they walked back home he stumbled once or twice, though he had not drunk that much. And several times he started to speak, and stopped; and he noticed the swimmer did the same. And that night in their narrow bed they hugged each other like two frightened children, lost at night in the woods.

21. We Are Clouds

Days passed. In the summer the shallows got so hot that they had to swim offshore to get any refreshment from the sea, and they searched for shells naked, as brown as the brown shellfolk. In the winter the water was so cold that it hurt their ankles as it rushed over their feet, and each day their skin turned as purple as the purple shellfolk, teeth chattering so that the fire in their bedroom was a lovely warmth. They spent storm days sitting in the bed watching the fire and talking and making love, while wind and rain lashed at their streaming window. Days like that were wonderful to Thel, but better yet were the long summer days, knee deep in surf under the sun, the intense rays pulsing on his neck in what felt like discrete little pushes of light and heat. He would look up from the sand tumbling in the whitewater and see the swimmer make some graceful move, her naked brown body twisting as she dove for a blue fragment, or streaming with water as she stood up after a dive; or the muscles of her arms rippling like backwash hitting an oncoming wave; or the sight of her legs and bottom and back as she walked away down the beach; or the tilt of her head as she walked toward him, looking down at the whitewater; and his heart would swell like an erection inside him and he would run through the broken surf and tackle her, kissing her neck and face until she laughed at him and they would make love there, with water and sand running over them. And sometimes she would run up and tackle him and they would do the same. And afterward they would play grunion in the surf, lying in the shorebreak and rolling up and down with the broken waves, taking the sea in and spurting it out like fountains, not thinking a thing. Every part of the day eternal, on summer days like that.

But the sun moved, and time passed nevertheless. Sitting in the shorebreak and watching his lover roll back and forth like beautifully rounded driftwood, Thel couldn't help thinking of that, from time to time; of time passing. He watched the clouds tumble overhead and let handfuls of sand run through his fingers, the little clear grains of quartz, flecks of black mica, pieces of coral, shell fragments like small bits of hard ceramic, and he saw that a substantial portion of the sand was made of shells, that living things had labored all their lives to create ceramic shelters, homes, the most permanent parts of themselves; which had then been pummeled into shards just big enough to see, millions upon millions of lives ground up and strewn under him, the beach made out of the wreckage of generations. And before long he and the swimmer too would become no more than sand on a beach; and they would never really have understood anything. Clouds rushed over the granite boulders of the point. Both granite and cloud had deeply complex textured surfaces, but in their mutability they were so different that it was hard to grasp. Reflecting on this he was surprised when the swimmer rolled into him on a wave and said, "We are clouds." And even more surprised when he heard himself reply, "But mountains are clouds, too."

22. Festival

One evening in early spring, after a long day on the hot tawny beach, Thel and the swimmer walked homeward, between great logs of driftwood that had washed ashore in the winter. In the blue twilight the logs looked like the bodies of fallen giants after a titanic battle, and above them in the sky a black star was fluttering, a bird high in the air. The swimmer clasped Thel's arm: "Look," she said, and pointed down the beach. "We have visitors." Torchlight glimmered around their shell home, a dozen points of yellow weaving in the dusk.

It was a group of the shellfolk, drinking liquor from curved shells and laughing as they danced in a circle around their home.

"Is it New Year's already?" the swimmer asked.

"Something else," Thel said.

They walked into the circle of light, and the shellfolk greeted them and explained it was Paros's birthday, and, as had happened once or twice before, they had decided to celebrate out at Thel and the swimmer's home, because they had not been able to agree whether brown or purple should host. So Thel and the swimmer joined the party, and ate and danced around the bonfire, and drank the liquor until everything was bright with the colors of fire and night, and the faces of the shellfolk were like crude masks of their daytime selves. Thel stumbled as he swung his feet out in dance, and a face the brown nearest black appeared before him, harsh with laughter and some shouted curse he didn't understand. Then someone the purple nearest black darted from the side, trying to trip him; Thel looked up and it seemed that people were not quite themselves, so that when Psara came out of their house holding the mirror overhead, Thel saw immediately that it was not Psara but Tinou. Tinou's black skin was now purplish in tint, and his face was twisted into Psara's visage, but with Tinou's big grin on it, and Tinou's shouting laugh.

As the transformed shellfolk seized Thel and the swimmer by the arms and dragged them to Tinou, a part of Thel was distracted, wondering if Psara had been Tinou all along, waiting all these years for whatever unimaginable reason to reveal himself—or if he had recently arrived in the village, and for reasons equally beyond comprehension had taken over Psara's form. In any case the voice was the same, and as Tinou placed the mirror in the wooden frame familiar from Oia, he laughed and said, "All life is a case of déjà vu, don't you think? And here we are again. Let us put the woman through first, so Thel can see what it looks like."

Thel struggled against the hands holding him down, but there were too many of them; all his neighbors, faces gleaming yellow and their eyes big and hungry as they watched the other group lift the struggling swimmer and force her feet into the bright liquid surface of the mirror. Tinou laughed and began his litany of questions, face inches from hers, spittle flying over her as he shouted in a gross parody of solicitousness, "Pinching? pressing? gnawing? cramping? crushing? wrenching? scalding? searing?" Thel was proud of her, the way she could hold her face rigid in a mask of stoic disgust, staring Tinou in the eye; but his stomach was flipflopping inside him as he saw the flesh of her legs and torso jerk at the contact with the mirror. Her body remained visible on the other side, flesh pale and inert yet still there among them. But remembering his own voyage on the other side, Thel feared they would be separated again, separated for good, and as her head popped through and she tumbled unconscious to the ground behind the mirror, Thel ripped convulsively away from the hands holding him and leaped forward to dive head first through the mirror and after her. The last thing he saw was Tinou's face, bright with torchlight and astonishment, as big around as the mirror itself.

23. The Pursuit

It was early morning, sun bright in his eyes. The swimmer lay next to him, sleeping or unconscious, and the world smelled as fresh as the shadows under trees. It hurt to move—to raise his head, to sit up—each joint a stab of pain when he moved it. Nevertheless he was happy to be with her still.

And yet it hurt, it hurt to move. This was an aspect of pain he noticed at once: it was hard to see through it to anything else. It took a discipline that would have to be learned.

Groaning, he rolled to her side and shook her awake. She woke with a gasp and held her left arm to her side. They sat up, looked around at a cold windy hillside—the spine, in fact, near the crest, on a prominence overlooking the sea. There was no sign of the shellfolk's bay. "The sun," the swimmer said. "It's moving east. It will set in the east."

Thel ignored the conundrum of how she could orient herself by something other than the sun in the sky, and merely nodded. "It's the mirror world," he said. "Everything's backward."

They would need clothes, having been thrust into this world nearly naked. Even something like the leaf capes that the treefolk had worn would help shelter them from the wind.

Then the swimmer pointed. "Look, it's him. The thing that took over our Psara." Far to the east, on the crest of the spine, a figure was walking away from them. It had a lump on its back. "He's carrying the mirror," the swimmer said. She had a hand shading her eyes, and was squinting. "It's Tinou, isn't it."

"Yes." Thel peered after the tiny figure speculatively. "If we could get the mirror from him, and push through it again. . . ."

It might end the pain. It might return them to their hot tawny beach. It might. . . . They looked each other in the eyes, stood with some difficulty, followed the figure east.

It was hard going, even on the trail. At sunset each day they descended to the beach, the sun sinking into the eastern sea. Over time they wove capes of palm and fan seaweed; and each night they foraged for food, and the swimmer found a mollusk that when eaten dulled the pain of her arm, and Thel's joints. But the spine was getting higher and higher as they moved farther to the mirror east, and the trail stayed right on the crest of the spine, and the descent to the beaches became more difficult. Tinou stayed about the same distance ahead of them, so perhaps he was descending to water each night as well; but finally one sunset it was impossible, and the next, possible but too strenuous to contemplate. Besides, in the dusk the swimmer caught sight of Tinou, sitting next to the trail far above them; so they slept tucked in a fault to get out of the wind, and it was cold but they found bird's nests, and were able to raid them for food. Holes and dips in the granite held rainwater for their thirst, and the swimmer had dried a collection of the mollusks for their pain. But they ran out quickly enough.

Because the spine continued to rise they caught sight of Tinou several times a day, always most of a day's walk ahead of them, a speck against the pinkish broken granite of the spine's bony edge. The peninsula here resembled the precipitous blade of rock that Thel had traversed with the treefolk, a knife edge of scarcely weathered granite slicing the world ocean into two halves, so many thousands of feet high that the waves were no more than the faintest pattern of curves on the sea. Higher and higher this great ridge arched into the sky, in irregular swoops, with an unhappily large number of sudden drops in the ridge that they were forced to climb down, and then up again. As they made their way they sometimes saw broken bird nests scattered down the cliffs to right and left, the precious meat of eggs burst and dried over the rocks and sticks: Tinou had been kicking them apart as he passed, and so must have known they were following.

When the swimmer's mollusks were gone, they hiked on in pain; her arm never healed, and Thel's joints creaked as if filled with grit, and each day's march added to their scrapes, bruises, sprains: and none of these ever seemed to heal. In the mirror world their bodies had lost that ability. Hunger plagued them as well, but not thirst; some of the ponds they passed had Tinou's feces floating in them, but there were more of the little granite pools than he could find to foul, and they drank as deeply as if they might be able to get their sustenance from water alone. They ate mice, and birds, and eggs, and once a whole glorious patch of blueberries; then later, a bright green moss. As they climbed higher the crevices in the rock supported nothing but this moss, and blotchy lichen, and occasional junipers that up here were nothing but little wind-tortured bushes, tucked between boulders and down in cracks. They slept under these piney shrubs, and tried eating the pinecones but couldn't.

One evening in the indigo twilight Thel looked at the swimmer's bright pain-filled eyes. It was hard to remember the world on the other side of the mirror, their life on the hot tawny beach—a blur, a moment like the snapping of fingers, a dream. He said, "We never gain on him, and we're going slower every day. My joints—" he stopped, wanting to cry. "I'm hungry," he said instead.

She gave him a handful of the moss. He noticed that her fingers were narrower and longer, with full webs of skin between them, and a dusting of blond fur over the backs of the hands. She said, "Whatever happens, you must accept it."

He ate, considering what that implied. His own hands were gnarled and his thumbs were longer and less opposed to the fingers than they used to be. Flickering, pulsing, throbbing, shooting, lancing, cutting, rasping, splitting, yes. All of these. "Maybe," he said, feeling his face and the enlarged jaw, "maybe if we made an extraordinary effort. If we hiked all night—if we kept hiking till we caught him, you know. He's sleeping at night like we are, or we'd never be keeping pace with him. If we dispensed with that, and hiked all night. . . ."

"Tomorrow," she said, sleepy. Her nose was smaller, and it twitched at the end. "One last night of rest, and we'll start tomorrow."

So the next sunset they stopped and foraged hard, collecting for their waist bags a bit of everything that was not granite itself, and they kept walking as the sun's light dimmed in the eastern sky, until only a few clouds high over the eastern sea caught a dim red glow in the deep indigo; and then by the light of the million stars they stumbled on.

Even in these remote heights the trail continued to wind its way along the spine crest, weaving to north or south depending on the shape of the rock and the cliffs on each side. The trail was in poor repair and had not been used, it appeared, in years. Sometimes, because it was the only flatness in a vertical landscape, and had been crushed to sand over the centuries, it was the only foothold for the green moss, so that a mossy path extended through the white rock, a highly visible black sidewalk in the starry night. Elsewhere the trail was just a slightly less obstacle-filled track, and nearly impossible to see. They kept losing it and coming on it again, and each time they rediscovered it Thel felt a tiny bit of satisfaction, of communion across time with whoever had built the trail; they had both picked the same route as best. And now it was essential that they keep to that route, if they were not to come to some impassable drop-off or rise; so in places they moved on hands and knees, feeling for sand and the intangible traces of earlier feet. At times they could move their heads to the side and stare straight down to the obsidian sea, flat and glossy some thousands of feet below; then they crawled, happy to hug the rock, long past talk, merely panting, gasping, from time to time whimpering or cursing under their breath, or simply groaning.

It was a long night. When dawn came and light leaked back into the world, in the hour when everything was made of translucent slabs of gray, Thel looked at the swimmer and observed that her whole shape was changing; torso longer, feet longer, ribs visible but not quite human, she was making a slow transformation back to something clearly aquatic—as she had always been, but now it was more pronounced, obvious that her race had descended from some fluid water mammal. She would be forced to crawl all the time if the transformation continued. And if her joints felt anything like his . . . he exerted the discipline, peered through the black haze of pain, saw that his own legs were thicker and his arms longer and heavier: it was a comfortable prospect to walk on all fours, and climbing the endless granite staircase of the spine was in some senses a happy challenge. Tree ancestor, he thought, and the image of a quick beautiful creature came into his mind, with the word *baboon*.

When the sun rose behind them, he looked at the ridge ahead carefully. This was the time of day when Tinou, looking back into the western dawn, would have trouble spotting them; while they looked up the ridge for him with the blaze of a nearby star as their spotlight. And eventually Thel's patience was rewarded. A head popped over the rock, just above and beyond them, a few minutes' walk only, and Tinou emerged, looked back blindly into the sun, and then hiked east up the ridge trail.

All that day they hunted him, hiding when he looked back, and so losing some ground. In pain as they were they could not keep pace with him in any case. But after sunset they caught sight of him, settling for the night at a flat spot in the trail.

There was still a trace of dusk in the sky when they crawled silently over the granite knobs to his camp. He was sleeping in the trail's sand, rolled in a blanket, or so they thought; but as they crept toward him his eyes opened, the whites reflecting starlight so that it seemed two glittery little jewels had popped into being, and with a laugh he said, "What persistent little things, crawling around in the night! Come out in the open, my little ones!"

He was standing over them. "My, my." Amusement made his beautiful voice bounce musically, a low fast burble. "A monkey and a water rat, it seems! Following me all this way, whatever for?" He loomed over Thel, and anger threaded into the amusement. "What kind of creature jumps through the mirror, eh? What kind of thing?"

But Thel and the swimmer were long past the snare of language, long past even much hearing Tinou's beautiful voice. He seemed to recognize this, for when they stood and approached him, spreading out to come at him from two sides, he retreated to the flat spot and his blanket.

"We want the mirror," Thel croaked, shuffling in toward him, sidling at angles in hopes of getting close more quickly than Tinou could notice. "Give it to us and we'll call it quits."

Tinou laughed and reached down into his blankets, pulled out the mirror bag. He held it out, then swung it around to throw it over the cliff into the southern sea—but he had not reckoned on Thel's new animal swiftness, and the bag crashed into Thel's upper arm as Thel rushed forward, and quicker than Thel could react or plan his numbed arm had caught Tinou by the throat and the claws of his other hand were raking Tinou's face and knocking aside the flailing arms, and then with tremendous force he caught up the sorcerer's head in both hands and threw the man's whole body to the ground. The swimmer dove and bit the bent and exposed neck, and awkwardly she got to her feet and they stood watching Tinou's blood drain out of him. Mortality, how strange: that Tinou, who had given them so much, was now gone! That he had left no more behind than this! It was hard to grasp.

Thel picked up the mirror bag and checked inside it; the mirror was unbroken, its surface the color of the sky some hour or two before. Meanwhile the swimmer had taken a knife from Tinou's bag, then found a firestone and clapper. The skeleton of a dead juniper stood twisted in the lee of boulders protecting the flat, and they broke it apart right down to the ground, bashing it with rocks they could barely lift. Thel started a fire while the swimmer cut away the skin over Tinou's thighs and buttocks, and hacked out big steaks that they roasted on sticks of juniper. When they were full they slept all the way through to dawn, warmed by the coals of the fire, and their first real meal in weeks.

24. The Green Flash

They woke in the late morning and hiked on, continuing eastward without discussion; it seemed clear to Thel that it was necessary, that they could not recross the mirror's smooth barrier on the site of Tinou's murder. That, in fact, there was a specific moment when it would be possible, a time and a place of which he knew nothing. They would have to watch. Without speaking of it he knew the swimmer had come to the same conclusion.

So they hiked on. The spine continued to rise, a granite wall splitting the sea, curving sinuously left and right, its top edge shattered over the eons into a broken split serrated knife edge of a ridge, rising unevenly as they crawled antlike along it. Often they crawled in the literal sense, as it was too painful and precipitous to walk. The moss grew less frequently here and they were often hungry. They often recalled the delicious meal of Tinou and regretted bitterly not staying to eat all of him, or at least not taking with them his heart and liver, they drooled thinking of it. "But livers make you mad," Thel said, "someone told me. Livers and life."

Hunger made them light and they found they could almost float up smaller aretes, just a touch here and there on the rough grainy rock, something to keep them from blowing away—to keep their shells from blowing away—everything inside having danced off on the wind. Once Thel tried to tell the swimmer how he felt about that, and he couldn't find the words to express it. He listened to the thin slow trickle of his thoughts and was surprised to hear how simple it had become: *I am climbing. I will always climb. The ocean is far below. That is a rock. I hope we find some moss.* These were his thoughts. And all that great whirling maelstrom of feeling and significance, of meaning: on the other side of the mirror, back down the peninsula among his forgotten friends, adventures, hopes, loves, dreams. All the dreams forgotten in the moment of waking, the flight that mattered so much . . . it was strange to no longer desire his desires, to look at the swimmer and see a broken ancient animal, to understand that all their love had been a way of fixing time, each embrace a moment's touch of the eternal, because the caress preserves. And yet here he crawled, something like a baboon, long knuckled hairy claws at the end of furred forearms, next to something like an otter, and only her eyes remained hers, the face he remembered mostly gone, but all of it evoked by those calm black eyes unfogged by the pain that crippled her gait, clear and calm and looking around, still capable of that small ironic amused squint, as when she laid her forearm next to his and said, "Now you see why we never had children."

They had come from different worlds. They spoke different languages. What they had shared had been at least partly illusion. And yet, and yet, and yet. . . . He took comfort in limping along the trail beside her, before her, behind her, thumping shoulders together or sharing moss they found. Beauty is only the beginning of terror, but just to have company, to share the news: there is a block of pink quartz. The seas look high. The wind is strong. And so the terror is staved off. Through black haze, beauty still perceived.

The ridge became deeply serrated, peaks like the teeth of a crude saw, making progress nearly impossible. Why go on, Thel thought one morning, but then the swimmer started off, scrambling up a broken cliff, using all fours, and he followed. Why was one of the questions that had gone away. Pain clouded his vision. A bird's nest gave them a feast. A storm left them soaked and cold. Near its end lightning shattered the peak above them, leaving their ears blasted, their nerves tingling, the strong smell of ozone in the wind. The shock of it seemed to invigorate the swimmer and she led all the next day with a will, over peak after peak, and down into deep cols. Their bodies were continuing to devolve, and only this allowed them to continue; now she could slither up rock, and how he could cling!

Then late one afternoon they made their way slowly over a hump of granite, and on the other side of it the peninsula dropped off into the sea, and came to an end.

It did so in a sheer clean prow, so smooth that it had to have been crafted. Also there was a smoothed waist-high wall to each side, bowing in and meeting at an angle, at the final point of the ridge. They walked out to the meeting of the two walls and leaned out to look. Clearly in some past age some civilization had come here and cut the granite cape smooth, creating two polished curving walls that came together in a straight edge which dropped to the sea in a single swoop, a clean crease like the bowline of a great ship. It was a drop, Thel estimated, of about ten thousand feet.

They walked around on this last forecastle, south to north and back again, looking down at the worksmanship of the two cliffsides. The polished granite was a flecked color, an infinitely dense mix of feldspar, quartz, and hornblende, so that just below them it appeared speckled like a trout, while farther down it seemed only a pinkish brown, like a kind of marble. Stones that Thel dropped over the walls skipped down and disappeared, and he never even saw them mar the dark blue of the sea.

It was nearly sunset. The swimmer wandered about, collecting rocks and laying them on the triangular block where the two walls met, the outermost point. Thel asked what she was doing and she smiled, gesturing at the mirror bag. "This must be the place, yes?"

Thel shivered, looked around. They could see for many, many miles, and the horizon was a clear sharp line between sea and sky; but the air was somehow thick, the sunlight in it dark. He took the mirror from the bag and put it on the final tip of the wall, held it in place with the rocks the swimmer had gathered. The eastern sky was full of the setting sun's yellow, and the mirror's surface glowed like a lens, as if scooping up all the beautiful sunlight in the world and flinging it westward, in a single coherent beam. "But what will we do?" Thel asked.

The swimmer stretched and stood on her hind legs, pointing with one foreleg at the glass. "At the last moment of sunset we will leap through," she said happily. But she was a sea creature, and this was, perhaps, a return to the sea; while he was a tree creature, in a land without trees, and he was afraid. And yet, and yet. . . .

They sat on the wall and watched the sunset, the light leaking out of the sky, the wind rustling the great space of dusk and the sea. The incredible furnace of the sun fountained light even as it sank into the ocean, which gleamed like a cut polished stone. Overhead a windhover fluttered in place, slicing the wind and sideslipping, and seeing it Thel was calmed. Whatever happened, yes, but more than that there was a kind of glory in it, to fling themselves out into the spaces they breathed, if only for one last dive or flight. The sun pared to a yellow line on the sea, and the sky darkened still; the mirror surface, still a kind of lens gathering sunlight, glowed a rich yellow that greened and greened as the sun's rays bent around the curve of the globe, prisming under gravity's pull. Out on the horizon the brilliant yellow line contracted in from both sides, greening all the while, until at last it was nothing but a single point of the most intense emerald light: the green flash, the sun's farewell, and the mirror's surface was flush with green light, the whole circle a pool of glowing green, and the swimmer's paw caught Thel by the arm and pulled him to his feet. Overhead the kestrel tipped and dove, down in a curving stoop, shooting by them and falling faster until it burst to white, like a meteor streaking over the sea; and with a cry the swimmer leaped forward and jumped through the mirror, and Thel followed fast on her heels. ●

ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Earthwork

Earth
By David Brin
Bantam, $19.95

"*. . . this is just about the most encouraging tomorrow I can imagine right now.*" From the author's preface to *Earth.*

Despite ongoing complaints about the lack of originality in SF these days, what with every author and publisher seeking to repeat what has been commercially successful rather than attempting something new (in a field that used to value originality above all else), at least some bestselling authors can and will take a chance on trying something unlike what they've done before.

You're not sure where David Brin's *Earth* is going in the first hundred pages; they are devoted to a montage of life in the next century, a future that is plagued by overpopulation (ten billion people), ozone loss, global warming and other foreseen disasters. Nevertheless (as implied above), it has not succumbed to anarchy, plague, designer drugs, or punk rockers. (Can it be that we're actually seeing a trend away from those fashionable future factors of the 80s?)

The myriad short sections which make up the montage are of diverse kinds. Some are in series, consistently titled ("Core," "Lithosphere," "Exosphere," etc.), following the continuing careers of various individuals whom one can only judge will eventually interact. There's an ongoing history of the Earth ("planet"), and numerous excerpts and statistics from the pervasive infonet of this future (a quote from Worldnet News, Channel 265, for instance). There are quotes from a book published by Doubleday in 2021, and some horrified looks back at the wasteful habits of the 1980s. (The general thrust of all of this, fiction and "nonfiction," is ecological and, as it were, natural, as befits a future the main efforts of which are dedicated to husbanding what few natural resources are left.)

And there are miscellaneous bits and pieces, each revealing another aspect of this future. I particularly liked the note to a computer netmail user which informed said user that his/her computer "mailbox" had been rifled by an autonomous worm program for reasons too complicated to go into, but which have to do with politeness on the Net. There are also bits of history, such as the fascinating and horrendous

Helvetian War, which pitted the U.N. against Switzerland (*Switzerland!?!* Don't laugh—the author actually makes a believable case.)

Eventually the narrative sections begin to fall into place around one particular event, which is a major one. A youngish researcher has carelessly dropped a sort of man-made black hole into the Earth's core. It seems that it will dissipate harmlessly, but in tracking it, he and his colleagues find a similar but larger anomaly careering around the center of the Earth which is growing and poses the possibility of the end of the world in a matter of a few years. What's worse, a mysterious and devastating accident in a space station is revealed as related to the treacherous mid-Earth singularity. Who put it there? And how? The answers to these questions are fascinatingly cosmic indeed.

Unfortunately, in this novel Brin's form seems to be working against his content. In his super space operas (*The Uplift War* et al.), the scattershot, mosaic approach works, as we leap from one alien race, one plot line to another around the Galaxy. But at the core of this novel (no pun originally intended) is a single-lined suspense thriller. Here the short sections back-and-forthing among many characters and many places dilute the plot line, and the mass of "extraneous" material almost does it in—one finds oneself skipping quotes and net bulletins to get on with the plot. This is in a sense tragic because the huge amount of filler material is extraordinarily well thought out; the problems, ecological questions, and nuances of conservation that Brin has posed for this world are extrapolation of the highest and most subtle order.

Skywork

Dragon Wing

By Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman

Bantam, $18.95

Dragon Wing by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman, which is Volume I of "The Death Gate Cycle," opens with a prologue devoted to a two-and-a-half page monologue by an unnamed character concerning all sorts of unknown people, places, and things and then, with Chapter 1, goes off to an entirely different set of circumstances. This is not an uncommon way to begin a novel, but I've never understood why an author does it. Perhaps s/he thinks that s/he is providing all sorts of subtle exposition, but so far as I'm concerned I'm floundering in a sea of unknowns at the very beginning of a story, and only with luck do I suddenly think "Oh, *that's* what that was all about" two hundred pages later. Maybe I'm just slow to twig into perfectly obvious things. . . .

Anyhow, after this mysterious introduction, we are, in sequence, rapidly introduced to two different story lines. One is promising—an assassin on the verge of execution is saved by a king's messenger, and thereupon commissioned by the king and his wizard to make off with the boy child who is heir to the throne and murder him. The child is an angelic-looking ten-year-old. Hugh, the assassin, does indeed "kidnap" Prince Bane in his dragon ship and carries him away from his island home, but can't bring himself to kill him. But then the Prince blithely tries to poison him just as they encounter some battling elves. . . .

Storyline two is occupied with a community of dwarves, otherwise known as "gegs," whose island home is dominated by a huge everworking, everexpanding machine. The gegs devote their lives to servicing and serving this machine. It is known as the Kicksey-winsey, and various parts of it are called the whirly-wheel and the cranky-clank. Communication among the gegs is by "squawky-talk" and they play a musical instrument known as the wheezy-wail. In short, the whole damn community is so satirically cutesy-wutesy that the reader comes very close to urpsy-wurpsing.

These two story lines eventually cross, and you might well ask how the two, quite disparate in style, combine. The answer is uneasily.

This is rather too bad, because they're set against a background of some interest. The islands mentioned severally above are not bodies of land surrounded by water, but bodies of land surrounded by air. This is a universe of floating islands and continents, ranging from the High Realm (near the "solarus" the eclipse of which by some very high-flying islands provides night) through the Mid Realm where are the floating homes of most of the humans and elves, down to the Low Realm where are the gegs. Transport is by flying dragon for humans, and dragon ship for the elves who can't manage the dragons. (The gegs, exploited by the elves, don't get around much.)

The plot, as mentioned, isn't really worthy of this potentially intriguing background, nor are its inhabitants, all of whom—human, elf, dwarf, or ancient race with eldritch powers—are humans in various sized bodies. If you're going to create a nonhuman race, for heaven's sakes, make it nonhuman and not just quirky. As for the characters, they are all either stupid, unpleasant or mysteriously ambiguous. There is, however, a canine who has it all over the other characters for personality and likability. And somehow I just can't quite take seriously a fantasy in which the favorite food of the elves is cooked cabbage.

It should be noted that this is the first in a seven book series that deals with a world sundered into parts—sky, stone, fire and sea. *Dragon Wing* (which, incidentally, doesn't have all that much to do with dragons) is obviously the one that deals with the Realm of Sky.

Scorpio Risen

Scor-Sting

By Frank A. Javor

DAW, $3.95 (paper)

It was one of those times. I'd

picked up four books in a row to review them, and put them down again after twenty-five pages because they weren't making sense. And it wasn't me—*other* things were making sense at the time. I thought of science fiction movies of the fifties, made by people totally ignorant of SF, in which a prevailing philosophy seemed to be: "It doesn't have to make sense. It's science fiction."

And so any old thing was brought out of left field and thrown into the plot, with the barest of justifications, if any. Recently a lot of SF *novels* have had something of that same quality, as well as the current cavalier disregard for exposition, which results in a good many stories that are simply impenetrable in the way they're told or in their backgrounds (what we're given of them).

So it was something of a relief to pick up Frank A. Javor's *Scor-Sting* and find it comprehensible. So it starts out with a cliff hanger (hero hanging by sweaty fingertips over the inhabited den of a giant scorpion) and flashes back a while to show us how he got there, but this is all made very clear and we're told who the hero is, and what kind of a future universe this is, and we get an early idea of where the plot is going—all those little things that actually keep a reader reading.

The hero, it seems, is a free lance holo photographer. The universe is standard interstellar and the world Scorpio is a heavy metal planet already gutted of most of its pickings.

The plot goes in a fairly unsurprising direction—hero finds himself on Scorpio due to an unlikely series of events (obviously manipulated) shooting holos for a mysterious, beautiful woman, and suddenly is in great demand with all sorts of lethal types, being chased about the arid Scorpio landscape, being beaten up, and finding a body for which the local security feels he might be responsible.

In fact, the plot is really a combination of mid-century *film noir* script and sixties sting novel (of which due warning is paid in the title) with some casually laid-in substitutions—desert planet for Nevada, android security chief for small town sheriff, large extra-terrestrial scorpions for small local variety, and superscientific time travel discovery for the "secret" everybody seems to be after. The ambiguous woman (the only one in the book) remains true to type, and should be played by Jane Greer in a declassé moment, or Lizabeth Scott.

Nevertheless, it's a quick and diverting read, and at least it makes sense.

(I must note that much is made in the novel of the hero's baldness, and the guy on the cover has a full head of hair. A small thing, admittedly, but that's the point—would it have been *that* much trouble to be accurate?)

Wizard's Walkabout

Walker of Worlds
By Tom De Haven
Doubleday, $19.95 (hard-cover); $8.95 (paper)

Of course there's coherent and coherent. The prologue of Tom De Haven's *Walker of Worlds* isn't all that clear—we're in a sort of fantasy kingdom with characters such as a cold mage named Master Squintik, another called the Mage of Four, the Mage of Luck (it takes a while to figure out that that is one person), and a lot of frenetic coming and going, mostly going to what you think just might be Our Earth. But you also get the idea that this is sort of setting a puzzle theme which the rest of the book will at least unravel.

Which is true. We do indeed move to our here and now, and become involved with a group of characters in a city that is almost New York. There are Geebo and Jere Lee, a couple of homeless people (*de rigueur* these days for any novel with pretensions to *in*), but of course they are sane, relatively clean and good-hearted homeless people. There's a "Boy Billionaire," the thirty-year-old heir to a pharmaceutical fortune, and his chauffeur and mistress. All these are (or get) involved in a wild *Wise Guy* type plot that revolves around commercially unusable pharmaceutical drugs with horrid side effects. These drugs have been employed in helping freedom fighters in third world countries. The characters are an unusually flavorful group; De Haven is a zippy writer about the here and now, keeping just this side of satire and evoking comparison with John Crowley, or Gene Wolfe when he's handling old suns instead of new.

But they also get caught up in the otherworldly chase that's going on with various inhabitants of Lostwithal, the fantasy realm, through *our* world. Among this lot are the aforementioned Squintik, a mage; Jack, a Walker (this is a three-word name, phrase, and title and sometimes makes for complications in punctuation— "Jack, a Walker had preceded the group. . . .") who is a sort of official tale teller for the King of Lostwithal; Eudrax, a Finder (same punctuation), a hunter-killer with five "claws" which are nasty little weasel-like animals with shape-changing abilities; and Lita, the mate (?) of Jack, a Walker, a tiny woman who is more often than not in the shape of a wasp who can steal human souls. These Lostwithalites and others at home are less successful than the humans; I had a problem telling them apart, and their magic- and ritual-ridden world never quite came into focus, even though the natives and assorted humans go back there about two-thirds of the way through the book (after, I must say, one hell of a dust-up in a city hospital involving just about everybody, not to mention the cops and a lot of recent mothers). This could be because this is only Book 1 of the "Chronicles of the King's Tramp."

BAIRD SEARLES

Asia To the Stars

Bursternal

By Michael Capobianco
Bantam, $3.95 (paper)

Michael Capobianco tells a basically interesting story in his *Burster*. It's mostly set on a generation ship sent out from a future Earth divided into East and West, which despite the division has reached a sort of cultural stasis. The stellar exploration ship *Asia* is basically created to give humanity a feeling of some sort of purpose, and has been built and populated by the East—all its inhabitants are from the nations of the Western Pacific Rim.

Then, because of a failure in their drive system they discover they are marooned around a newly discovered star system, and at the same time they receive a transient electromagnetic "burster" from Earth just as the continuous signal being received from Earth stops.

One of their exploratory ships is modified to contain a crew of one human; the scout ship's rudimentary intelligence is uneasily combined with one of the several artificial intelligences, here called Resource Managers, that make up part of *Asia*'s personnel. An adolescent, Peter Zolotin, is selected to go back to Earth, where he discovers that due to the same malfunction of the stellar drive that has marooned *Asia,* life on Earth has been destroyed, leaving only a few dispirited Martian colonists. Their community is being sabotaged by one of their number who is convinced that all humanity must go—this turns out to be Peter's female guide, who seduces and then attempts to kill him. He kills her instead, and returns to *Asia*. In the meantime, the ship's scientific community has revolted against the captain, who has instituted a repressive regime with the help of the "Resource Managers," whom she has reprogrammed. The rebels are "exiled" to a world of the system they are in that is only barely able to support life. Peter, due to the rapport he has established with the "mind" of the scout ship he has traveled with to Earth, more or less saves the day for humanity.

Unfortunately, all this doesn't quite come off for several reasons: The writing and dialogue are stiff ("Roh Ek Sai stood from his console and cleared his throat mightily," "Larry smiled through the downfalling hairs of his prominent mustache. . . ."), and the author has crammed a very busy plot into a comparatively short length, giving an undeveloped feeling to most of the ideas. Both of these problems also apply to the huge cast of characters; characterizations are stiff and uninvolving, and the size of the cast makes almost all of them seem undeveloped also and hard to keep straight.

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Isaac Asimov Presents the Great SF Stories: 21 (1959)* edited by Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg (DAW, $4.95, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., New York, New York 10014. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Well, once again it's Christmastime, and, of course, it wouldn't be the December issue without a Christmas story. Next issue we feature *two* of them. First, new writer **Bridget McKenna** makes her *IAsfm* debut with a bittersweet story of disenfranchisement, loss, and renewal, as an old man has a holiday brush with a Touch of Strange, in "Evenings, Mornings, Afternoons." Then **Sharon N. Farber** changes the tempo, and delivers a holiday Close Encounter of a very different sort, in the wild, funny, and gonzo story of how "Space Aliens Saved My Marriage"—after *this* one, if you hear the patting and pawing of tiny hooves on your roof Christmas Eve, you might not be so sure that it's Santa Claus...

We turn away from seasonal concerns for the rest of our December issue: multiple Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Connie Willis** takes us to a remote and exotic corner of the Earth—modern-day Denver—for a tantalizing glimpse of a fascinating vision, in "Cibola"; Campbell Award-winner **Judith Moffett** takes us along on a lonely boy's search for himself, a search that takes him into some very dangerous territory indeed, in the powerful and moving story of "The Ragged Rock"; critically acclaimed British writer **Brian Stableford** makes his *IAsfm* debut with a look at an ordinary man who finds himself in a very *unusual* situation, in the wry and acerbic "Bedside Conversations"; **Lewis Shiner** takes us cruising down a street of dreams in "Wild for You"; **Cherry Wilder** returns to relate a disquieting encounter with That Old-Time Religion, in "A Woman's Ritual"; new writer **Mark W. Tiedemann** makes his *IAsfm* debut with a taut and fast-paced tale of betrayal and intrigue in a near-future Spain, in "Targets"; the prolific **Phillip C. Jennings**, who contributed our October cover story, returns to take us along on a very strange archeological expedition, in the surprising story of what is discovered on "The Gadarene Dig"; new writer **Mary Rosenblum** returns to take us sailing on some dangerous and storm-tossed seas, with something more than life at stake, in "Floodtide"; and new writer **Lawrence Person** makes his *IAsfm* debut with a hard-edged and hard-eyed look at just what can be done with a few "Frames of Light." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our jam-packed December issue on sale on your newsstands on October 16, 1990.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Early Fall is a big time for con(vention)s outside the con-crowded Northeast corridor. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. Early evening is usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; identify yourself and your reason for calling right off). When writing cons, enclose an SASE (and say what it's for). Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, playing a musical keyboard.

SEPTEMBER 1990

21-23—**InCon.** For info, write: **Box 1026, Spokane WA 99210.** Or call **(509) 624-4330** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Spokane WA (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests include: Dean Ing, F. Paul Wilson, Bob Mirr, Betsy Mott, Beth Finkbiner, John Dalmas, Donna Tingle.

22-23—**ValleyCon. (701) 232-1954.** Fargo ND. No guests or hotel were mentioned in the info I got.

28-30—**Georgia Fantasy Con. (404) 925-2813.** Radisson, Atlanta GA. Moorcock, Ellison, R. Gould.

28-30—**ConText. (614) 889-0436.** Hilton, Worthington OH. Sheffield, Clement, S. Shwartz, Bujold.

28-30—**ICon. (319) 337-6647, 354-2236, 234-2975.** Westfield Inn, Coralville IA. P. Farmer, McKee.

OCTOBER 1990

5-7—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** John (007 author) Gardner, Nelson Bond.

5-7—**ConTradiction, Box 2043, Newmarket Stn., Niagara Falls NY 14301.** Joan Vinge, Judith Merril.

5-7—**NonCon, c/o ESFACUS, Box 4071, PSSE, Edmonton AB T6E 4S8. (403) 347-7723.** Roger Zelazny.

5-7—**TusCon, 4559 E. Burns, Tucson AZ 85711. (602) 881-3709 or 622-2520.** No more news here yet.

5-7—**MinnCon, 3136 Park Ave. S., Minneapolis MN 55407. (612) 825-8256.** Works of Lovecraft, etc.

12-14—**Ditto, c/o Mattingly/Peters, 7501 Honey Ct., Dublin CA 94568.** Chicago IL. For fanzine fans.

12-14—**ArmadilloCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766. (512) 331-5803, 443-3491, 448-3630.** Many guests.

19-21—**Invention, c/o Box 37317, Milwaukee WI 53233.** Esther M. Friesner. "SERious & CONstructive."

19-21—**NecronomiCon, Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569. (813) 677-6347.** Usually about 600 show up.

19-21—**ConStellation, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815. (205) 882-1006.** Bujold, S. Honeck, Cherryh.

19-21—**NotJustAnotherCon, c/o SCUM, RSO Box 16, SAO, U. Mass., Amherst MA 01003. (413) 545-1924.**

26-28—**MileHiCon, Box 27074, Denver CO 80277. (303) 936-4092.** One of the oldest Western cons.

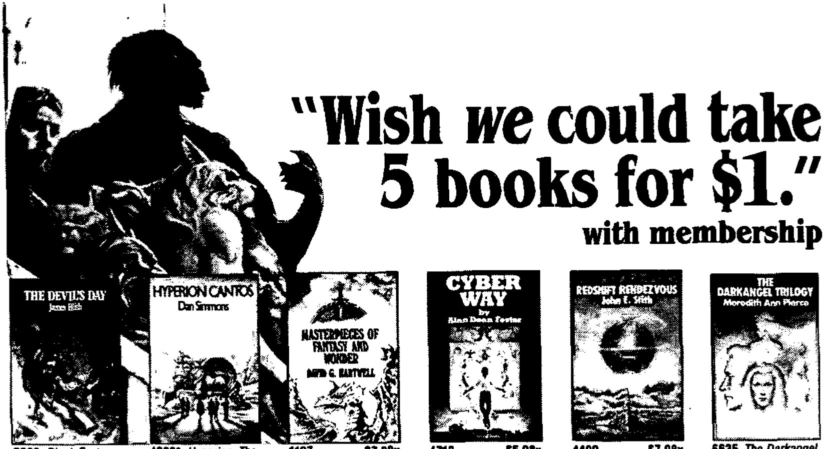
26-28—**DreamCon, 10131 Evergreen Way #103, Everett WA 98204. (206) 481-0153.** S. Perry, Willich.

AUGUST 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $95 to 12/31/90.

AUGUST 1992

28-Sep. 1—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 275-0027.** WorldCon. $65 to 9/30/90.



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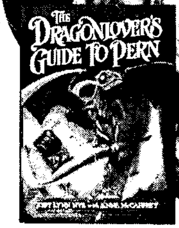
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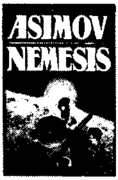
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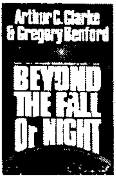
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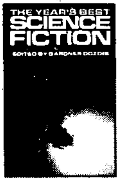
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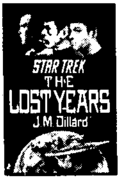
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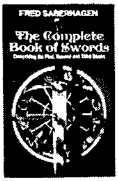
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